

**A Comparative Study  
of Tropes of Cultural Pessimism  
in Postwar Britain and France**

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## **Declaration**

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7 January 2008

## Thesis Abstract

This thesis examines the occurrence, convergence and divergence of tropes of cultural pessimism in British and French letters over the two decades following the Second World War. Like other forms of pessimism, cultural pessimism is a consistently negative approach to the future; here it refers to the prospects of culture as a whole, seeing it as being in decline. The specific cultural context surveyed here has received little critical attention in the already limited declinism scholarship; as a time of sweeping change, it is a particularly revealing juncture that also suggests new tropes for the cultural pessimism range. Although Britain and France had arrived at the end of the war in rather different circumstances, in the following twenty years they underwent similar social, economic and cultural processes: cultural massification, decolonisation, modernisation, Americanisation, postwar reconstruction and Cold War positioning. These processes are taken as the basis for this ad hoc thematic comparison. The first section discusses cultural pessimism with reference to class and social structure; it surveys discourses on Culture and popular culture and expands on two illustrative works: Jean Genet's *Le Balcon* and Alan Sillitoe's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*. In the second section, conceptions of national identity and collective memory come to the fore: similar reattachments to heritage, real or imagined, are explored through Angus Wilson's *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes* and Marguerite Duras's *Hiroshima mon amour*. The third section unpacks the morally ambivalent concept of youth along with the advent of youth culture and its greater adaptability to modernisation and Americanisation, and develops this alongside discussions of Boris Vian's *L'Ecume des jours* and Colin MacInnes's *Absolute Beginners*.



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# Introduction

## ***Rationale***

This thesis will argue for the pertinence of the theme of cultural pessimism as a basis for the interpretation of cultural phenomena in the postwar period. Several concepts and tropes of this theme will be used to recontextualise certain British and French literary works of the two decades following the Second World War. These texts will be considered in their broader cultural context, taking into account associated contemporary cultural discourses and a range of literary and theoretical works. The French and British sides will be discussed separately, each in its own terms; however, frequent links will be drawn to point out comparisons, correspondences and influences across the Channel. This end will be served by a structure of themed chapters, exploring social structure and class, national identity, and youth culture respectively. As a whole, this thesis will provide a window onto the workings of an intellectual, culturally pessimistic attitude in Britain and France, post-war but pre-‘Sixties’.<sup>1</sup>

The thematics of cultural pessimism are pregnant with meaning. Put simply, cultural pessimism is a particular subset of pessimism that concerns the prospects of culture and consistently sees them as negative or doomed. Culture in this context has been understood variously as national culture, ‘high’ culture, or that of humanity as a whole. The original scope of this project included only ideas of cultural decline (e.g. decadence or degeneration), but these form only part of the picture. Another major subset of cultural pessimism includes images of the actual end of culture, be it in states of ‘civilisation’ or ‘barbarism’ or in a total apocalypse. Cultural pessimisms also vary regarding the root cause of culture’s corruption: some regard cultural decline as a creeping, intensifying trend that becomes increasingly apparent throughout history (which leads some to call this approach ‘historical pessimism’); others see culture as essentially

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<sup>1</sup> That is, before the cultural phenomenon of ‘the Sixties’, as distinct from the decade itself. See the discussion of periodisation below.

corrupt, considering (like Walter Benjamin) each document of culture also a document of barbarity.<sup>2</sup>

Tropes of cultural pessimism may be apparently disparate, but their epistemic merit is in their interconnectedness. To understand the many tropes and outlooks of 'cultural pessimism' requires understanding them as one system, however diverse, in which all parts are connected and therefore indicative of one another. Such a study would be first and foremost a study of content, of thematics and their interpretations, as it is the pessimistic themes that define this system.

This thesis is intended as a new outlook onto familiar phenomena, offering the application of the thematics of cultural pessimism to postwar British and French cultures. This intended import is strengthened by relative lacks in the relevant fields. Firstly, studies of cultural pessimism are few and far between and are relatively recent. Among these studies, rare are the ones that approach cultural pessimism synthetically: the majority deal with particular subsets of it, such as degeneration or millennialism.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, in cultural pessimism scholarship there is little to account for the particular period discussed in this thesis, stretching roughly from the mid-1940s to the mid-1960s. In this respect the study offered below ploughs its own furrow. Thirdly, this thesis joins a small group of comparative French-British cultural studies. While these studies are not numerous, over the past decade interest in comparative perspectives has been growing, as has their legitimacy, not least under the regionalist mantle of European Studies. Lastly, a study of cultural pessimism falls within the scope of history of ideas, itself a type of cultural history. Cultural histories are written by historians as well as by non-historians, often being modern language scholars, who seek to fill the broadening, culturalist remits of modern language studies.

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<sup>2</sup> Both allusions will be discussed below.

<sup>3</sup> A good primer on degeneration is *Degeneration: The Dark Side of Progress*, ed. by Edward J. Chamberlin and Sander L. Gilman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985); on the millennium in modern secular perceptions see Krishan Kumar, *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987); on decadence, see Charles Bernheimer, *Decadent Subjects: the Idea of Decadence in Art, Literature, Philosophy, and Culture of the Fin de Siècle in Europe*, ed. by T. Jefferson Kline and Naomi Schor (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002). See also the literature survey below.

This study is of the latter variety and as such offers a different perspective to those of historians who might study the same objects. In sum, the particular thematic and methodological slant of this thesis should distinguish it from related works.

These are the basic intentions of this thesis; but it is equally important to clarify what it does not intend. Because of its limited length and scope, this thesis cannot be an exhaustive survey of postwar British and French literatures or cultures. Therefore, the works and topics were chosen for discussion because they were consequential and representative in articulating the central concerns of their period. The thematic interpretation through cultural pessimism is not intended to be a definitive one, but only plausible, valid and contributing to the greater understanding of its objects. Furthermore, this is not merely a conceptual study of cultural pessimism: it also aims to elaborate on the theme's relatively new definitions, to make several internal links and suggestions, and to then apply the theme as interpretive tool. Overall, this study is closely circumscribed by proposing an interpretive connection between two national cultures in postwar transition and pessimistic attitudes that may have influenced them.

This introductory chapter will now go on to present the objects and terms of engagement of this study. Its first part will expand on the concept of cultural pessimism, the definitions and development of cultural pessimism in history, as well as some notable terms recurring in cultural pessimism scholarship. Four main tropes of cultural pessimism will be introduced, followed by a suggestion of their relevance to various discourses and fields of inquiry. The second part of this introduction will introduce the historical context of this study, starting with an explanation of the period chosen (ca. 1944-1964), and of the problems of comparative periodisation. This will be followed by an elaboration of the similarities between postwar France and Britain that make up the basis for their comparison, also taking into account their respective peculiarities. The third part of this introduction will survey the available scholarship on the topics of this thesis, and will note several tendencies and problems this literature presents. This will lead us to the fourth part of the chapter, where the methodology of this thesis will be explained, together with its structure of three thematically defined sections.

## ***Cultural Pessimism***

### **A composite discourse**

Individual pessimism, as an object of psychology, is usually taken as an inclination consistently to view the world and future prospects negatively. *Cultural* pessimism differs from individual pessimism in two main respects: it limits the scope of pessimism to questions of culture; and it expands the character of pessimism beyond individual interest and to the realm of culture as collective identity. In a recent and wide-ranging study, Oliver Bennett asserts that “cultural pessimism arises with the conviction that the culture of a nation, a civilization or of humanity itself is in an irreversible process of decline”; and also, “in its severest form, it goes beyond the idea of culture as a set of intellectual and artistic practices, or even culture as a ‘signifying system’, and attaches itself to culture as a whole way of life,” therefore cultural pessimism is grounded in such common and hazy forms as fears for the continuation of ‘life as we know it’.<sup>4</sup> This is an important effort to circumscribe a wide-ranging generic attitude or outlook, across the many ideologies, poetics and stylistics into which it translates. Bennett is primarily interested in ‘the postmodern world’; this thesis, on the other hand, will look at the period just before it, at what one might call the ‘prehistory’ of the postmodern.

Fundamental to the attitude of cultural pessimism is the idea of impending collective human degradation, the idea of a seemingly determined (and debatably reversible) cultural finitude. It concerns mental attitudes rather than the ontological actuality of decline. Arthur Herman intimates that he is often asked, since he works ‘on decline’, whether culture is in fact declining or not – an experience recurrently shared by the author of this thesis.<sup>5</sup> This is a common elision that must be avoided: cultural pessimism is a kind of pessimism, that is, a mental disposition rather than a real state of affairs. Whether it has much to rely on in real history is a moot point; nevertheless, this highlights two aspects of cultural pessimism, as cognitive disposition and as historical outlook.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Oliver Bennett, *Cultural Pessimism: Narratives of Decline in the Postmodern World* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), 1.

<sup>5</sup> Arthur Herman, *The Idea of Decline in Western History* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), 1.

<sup>6</sup> Bennett, 15.

A contested distinction exists between cultural pessimism and historical pessimism: as Herman, who makes the distinction, puts it, “the historical pessimist sees civilization’s virtues under attack from malign and destructive forces that it cannot overcome; cultural pessimism claims that those forces form the civilizing process from the start.”<sup>7</sup> However, adopting Bennett’s definition renders Herman’s distinction secondary, regarding a classification of cultural-pessimist positions: some strains are born of bad experience, others rely on *a priori* judgments; some see decline as reversible, others consider it ultimate.<sup>8</sup>

If cultural pessimism has a history, it is important to recognise its agents. J.H. Buckley suggests a starting point in his study of Victorian Decadents when he distinguishes between ‘writers of decadence’ and ‘decadent writers’.<sup>9</sup> The distinction is between those who hold Decadent opinions (or in our case, cultural pessimists) and those who merely document or convey Decadent attitudes or mindsets, without necessarily embracing those attitudes themselves. This distinction is relevant to a broadly defined culture as the question of authorial intention is only important when a writer also conveys it by non-fictional or non-literary means, in their capacity as a public figure rather than as a ‘hidden’ author. For this thesis, only one side of Buckley’s distinction – the ideas, images and tropes of cultural pessimism – is relevant. ‘Decadent style’ (see below) has no parallel in a looser, broader grouping of ideas like cultural pessimism. There is no ‘pessimist stylistics’, only some culture-specific pessimistic tropes: narratives, themes, images.

Expanding the question of agency to include traditions of thought, Ilan Gur-Ze’ev suggests a three-way differentiation between self-proclaimed pessimists, who have allied themselves with the Western pessimistic tradition of philosophical thought; ‘appropriated’ pessimists, themselves not belonging to the pessimist tradition; and, finally, thinkers not belonging or appropriated to the pessimistic tradition, whose work still prominently features pessimistic

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<sup>7</sup> Herman, 444.

<sup>8</sup> See Bennett’s fifth question in Bennett, 12.

<sup>9</sup> Jerome Hamilton Buckley, *Triumph of Time: A Study of the Victorian Concepts of Time, History, Progress, and Decadence* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1966), 88-93.

elements.<sup>10</sup> This differentiation illuminates cognitive and volitional aspects of pessimistic expression as public action: the consideration of a pessimistic work independently of its author and his allegiances, and the importance of pessimist traditions to the validation of pessimist standpoints. The present thesis contends that in the postwar period several overlapping traditions of culturally pessimistic thought persist, some older and some more general than others, generally sharing common wellsprings. The mutual influences of these traditions produce newer expressions and varieties of cultural pessimism, products of their times no less than of the traditions that have informed them.

## History of decline

Any historical account of ideas of cultural decline is bound to be partial, and this short survey is no exception. That notwithstanding, it will nevertheless attempt to include several central themes relevant to this study, the full details of which are in the bibliography.

The Jewish and the Christian paradigms, both based on monotheistic religions of revelation, share a fundamental faith in two symbolic and narrative elements: the start of humanity's life in the world with the Fall and banishment from Eden; and its end in redemption by transcendence.<sup>11</sup> Four major prophecies of the Old Testament (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel) and several of the Apocrypha and Pseudoepigrapha are visions of apocalypse and salvation of the righteous. The New Testament ends with a more detailed account of a similar terminus in the Book of Revelation. Additionally, Pentateuch guidelines for the eventuality of a whole community becoming 'fallen' either by heresy or by lax morality (the issue of *Ir HaNidaxat*, the corrupted town) preceded Old Testament canonisation and further elaboration in the Mishna and Talmud. This, too, attests to the special attention and violent reaction to the possibility of collective (as distinct from personal) degeneration accorded by the religious establishment.

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<sup>10</sup> Ilan Gur-Ze'ev, *The Frankfurt School and the History of Pessimism* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University Magnes Press, 1996), 13.

<sup>11</sup> In that, they were preceded by the Sumerians (ca. 4000BC) and Zoroaster (ca. 1400BC). Bennett, 11.



Frank Kermode suggests coupling the Christian concept of decadence with the concept of empire, as part of a host of symbolic terms from the revelation and apocalypse at the end of the New Testament, relating the myths of the end of history and of redemption. In this context, decadence is the process of the waning power of empire – a specific empire or the empire of man, i.e. civilisation. Its occurrence signifies the imminent End, of empire and of history. Thus Kermode's future-directed "myth of decadence" serves to depict and explain an "end-dominated age of transition," around which various phenomena in nature and society cohere, affecting perception of the present through ordering time and Man's place in it, replacing endless transition with a clear "sense of an ending."<sup>12</sup> To Kermode, the need for (at least possible) closure was not unique to Christianity or other religious traditions. He sees cultural-pessimistic patterns as relevant to literary studies: secular tragedy reinterprets apocalyptic patterns, and its tragic undoing replaces religious decadence.

Modernity, greatly overlapping with secularisation in Western Europe, offers the first opportunity to examine decline (and cultural pessimism) in relation to the concept of progress. Belief in human perfectibility had preceded modernity, but progress (and its critics, like Erasmus and Machiavelli) first appears in public discourse as integral to Renaissance humanism, then in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century New Science writings (by, for example, Vico, Bacon).<sup>13</sup> Progress was central to the late-eighteenth century Enlightenment project. By then, studies of classical forms and their disappearance had produced historical analyses with interesting conclusions. Edward Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-1788) asserted that Rome's moral and cultural decline was the cause of its political and social disintegration and ruin, a fate shared by all civilisations as a natural law of deterministic history. Count de Volney expressed similar thoughts in *Les Ruines, ou méditations sur les révolutions des empires* (1791). Thomas Malthus, in his *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798) raised concerns about the sustainability of economic progress, which might turn into retrogression should it exceed society's capacities to feed

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<sup>12</sup> Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction with a New Epilogue*, rev. edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000 [1966]), 12-17.

<sup>13</sup> See Bennett, 9.

itself: history and humanity's progress might move with 'accelerated velocity' and adversely affect the human psyche. Jean-Jacques Rousseau saw modernity and progress as grounds to wish for their own undoing (*Emile, or On Education*, 1762) or for a reformed civil society (*The Social Contract*, 1762).<sup>14</sup>

The nineteenth century is replete with examples of cultural pessimism, not least because of disillusionment with the 'project of modernity'. Romantics like Blake, Shelley, Schiller, and Thomas Carlyle (in 'Signs of the Times', 1829), disapproved of the detrimental effects of technological progress on culture, influencing later observers like Matthew Arnold (*Culture and Anarchy*, 1868-9). Désiré Nisard's invocation of decadent Rome to critique 1830s France was then adopted and elaborated by Baudelaire, Verlaine, and Mallarmé. The pessimistic meditations of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche became touchstones for future philosophies of strife and irrationality.<sup>15</sup> With steadily accelerating industrialisation and urbanisation, and a growing (and increasingly visible) working class, Marx's condemnation (in *Capital*, 1867) of the bourgeois way of life for essentially exceeding its capacities was resonant as both an analytical diagnosis and a moral repudiation. Darwin's evolutionary conjecture in *The Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871) was similarly influential through its many usurpations as allegedly corroborating physiognomy, eugenics, 'social Darwinism', and racial supremacist theories. Marx's (and Tocqueville's) view of social and cultural massification compounded with pseudo-Darwinian elements, in other widely read works such as Gustave LeBon's *La Psychologie des Foules* (1895) and Max Nordau's *Degeneration* (1895).

The end of the First World War saw the appearance of the most influential culturally pessimistic historical analysis in the twentieth century, Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* (1918-1922). Spengler derived from the natural sciences his understanding of historical 'high cultures' as organic (collective) bodies with single life-spans, and his model for a deterministic 'historical morphology' of cultural life-cycles. Like Herder, Kant and Humboldt

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<sup>14</sup> These were preceded by his critical 'Discourse on the Arts and Sciences' (1750) and 'Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men' (1754); Bennett, 8.

<sup>15</sup> See Bennett, 5-6.

before him, Spengler distinguished between *Kultur*, the organic phase of culture most concerned with the idea of morality, and *Zivilisation*, its state of irreversible decline, when it becomes artificial and superficial. Latest in the succession of world 'high cultures' comprising history was the restless, haunted, 'Faustian' West, that Spengler believed had been declining since Napoleon. He saw this in its alienation from the strong local bonds of organic culture; the state epitomised by the *cosmopolis*, showing cultural disintegration in the rule of money, democracy and the press; and the rise of science, rationalism, socialism, and internationalism. This led Spengler to anticipate a new ascendant 'high culture', which for a while he identified in regenerationist ideas of German national-socialism. Spengler's historical application of the culture/civilisation distinction and its deterministic vigour were resonant, shaping a widespread form of interwar (and postwar) cultural pessimism and inspiring similar studies, such as Arnold Toynbee's *A Study of History* (1934-1961).

Several of Spengler's contemporaries were similarly influential in their cultural pessimism. Freud's *Civilisation and Its Discontents* (1929) criticised the destructive contradictions and tensions of the modern West. In the wake of Freud and Marx, the work of Benjamin ('Theses on the Concept of History', 1940) and Adorno and Horkheimer (*Dialectics of Enlightenment*, 1944) reflected on the inherently flawed nature of 'Enlightened' civilisation, showing its barbarism in mass repression and a 'culture industry' driven by an overarching 'instrumental rationality'. More recently, Jean-François Lyotard's term 'the postmodern condition' (*La Condition postmoderne*, 1979) denotes a sense of displacement and loss in the late twentieth-century West, where the eroded authority of 'grand narratives' left a lack of an overarching structure of meaning to contemporary human experience. One lost 'grand narrative' is universal humanism, the foundational belief in the individual as the autonomous elementary agent of ethics, society and history. This kind of bourgeois 'ideological thought' was opposed by Althusser, who suggested instead that social relations and masses are ethically and historically more important than individuals and their wills. Althusser's radical 'anti-humanism' was matched by similarly evocative and controversial assertions such as the 'death of man' (or 'death of the subject') in Foucault's *Les Mots et les choses* (1966), or Barthes's 1968 proclamation of the liberating 'death of the author' (as monolithic authoritative function). Foucault

thought the human as subject was formed by social and cultural practices and was therefore bereft of any (self-)constitutive role. To the contemporary westerner, the chagrin and resentment of the postmodern condition are more than a philosophical attitude: they shape the experience of life as categorically lacking, prompting either concern or indifference.

## **Terms of cultural pessimism**

An adequate history of any idea or set of ideas should include a survey of the terminology related to it – a challenging task with cultural pessimism. The relative novelty of a general discourse on cultural pessimism is due in part to the fact that existing discourses regarding its constituent parts, chiefly ‘decadence’ and ‘degeneration’, are usually confined to considerations of the *fin-de-siècle*. Decline is also elusive: scholarship accepts that the term ‘decadence’ does not have a fixed historical referent, meaning quite different things throughout history and in religious or secular contexts.<sup>16</sup> However related, a plurality of terms indicates a plurality of significances and contexts of usage, all of them relevant to understanding cultural pessimism. Here again, discussions of each term are intentionally elementary, as each term could easily occupy an entire thesis on its own.

### Decadence

The word ‘decadence’, derived from the early Medieval Latin *decadentia* for ‘falling away from’, denotes several things. Its English lexical meaning is defined by the OED as a material phenomenon, “the process, period, or manifestation of moral or cultural decline.”<sup>17</sup> It is also a metaphor for a process of deterioration that gives decline a suggestive visual or spatial interpretation of

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. Richard Gilman, *Decadence: The Strange Life of an Epithet* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1979). Gilman thinks this lack of fixity is wrong and dangerous, wishing the term ‘decadence’ be abandoned in scholarship altogether.

<sup>17</sup> “Decadence,” in *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, rev. 10<sup>th</sup> edn, ed. by Judy Pearsall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 370.

‘falling away’, and with that a stronger, figurative negative connotation.<sup>18</sup> This metaphor also functions as a mytheme, an elementary functional unit in the structural analysis of myths, and specifically religious *fabulae mundi* of antiquity. In those myths decadence helps explain the degradation of experience as we know it toward finitude as the way of the world. Decadence is therefore closely linked with eschatology, and this association has shaped its common meanings to this day, even in modern secular incarnations of culture as ideology that superseded religion.<sup>19</sup>

Decadence also appears in the history of European ideas as the proper name of a short-lived post-romantic artistic movement, active mainly in London and Paris of the 1880s and early 1890s. The Decadents were not a clearly defined group and shared several characteristics and members with the Symbolists, who similarly sought to disturb the otherwise straightforward referential function of literary language. Talk of Decadence in cultural-historical contexts usually refers to this specific movement and its times. The Decadents and their work inform arguments over modernism and over progress versus degeneration. As such they were not alone: confusingly, “it was this sense of decline that inspired many of the revivals of the nineteenth century: the Nazarenes, the pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Pugin’s Gothic Revival, the Arts and Crafts movement and Art Nouveau.”<sup>20</sup>

### Decadent Style and Thematics

Gayatri Spivak suggests that the Decadent formulation of the literary task of reference be understood through its background in the revolt of ‘modernism’ against its ‘traditional’ antecedents. Decadent style refers to the ‘natural’ world not as it ‘really is’ but at one remove, as a modern world already made into artifice. Its challenge is then self-consciously to display a discontinuity between icon and significance, and to create the readers’ knowledge of that gap and its

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<sup>18</sup> For a discussion of decadence as a spatial metaphor see Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, rev. edn (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1987), 152-154.

<sup>19</sup> On decadence in Christian eschatology see Kermode, 3-31.

<sup>20</sup> Patrick Bade, “Art and Degeneration: Visual Icons of Corruption,” in *Degeneration: The Dark Side of Progress*, ed. by Edward J. Chamberlin and Sander L. Gilman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 221.

meanings, so as to undermine the otherwise “comfortable faith in words’ reference to things” (what Russian Formalists later called the ‘estrangement effect’).<sup>21</sup> Alienated from their present, Decadents sought the bizarre, the sublime and fantastic, to be captured only by the finest filaments of the aesthetic connoisseur’s senses. The ordinary objects surrounding characters in Naturalist nineteenth-century novels were replaced in Decadent works by an eclectic assemblage of obscure curiosities. Awareness was drawn to the ironic gap between the seemingly ‘beautiful’ language and what is otherwise commonly understood as ‘beautiful’, language itself has to be transformed into a strangely artificial encoding. The intentionally unnatural and disturbed text was constructed through rare and obscure words; arcane allusions to extinct traditions, semantic contexts and linguistic registers; and neologisms created especially by the Decadent author.<sup>22</sup>

Spivak’s treatment of Decadence as literary style is telling: as she herself claims, most of the discussions of Decadent style are grounded in ‘literary historical research’, reducing literature to a reflection of the social history of its time by the use of suggestive slogans like ‘the pursuit of artificiality’ and ‘art for art’s sake’ (the name of a different, albeit related, artistic grouping). Decadent style is characterised by an aestheticist attitude to both experience (in content) and literature (in form); an overabundance of detail and description that seemingly disintegrates the surface cohesion of the text; the theme of highly individualistic, self-sufficient experience devoid of a sense of environment; and suffering rejection and mourning loss as life- and identity-affirming. Other topoi proper to *fin-de-siècle* Decadent literature are the insatiable desire of the sadistic woman (the *femme fatale*); the rampant sexuality of nature; the vital energy

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<sup>21</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Decadent Style,” *Language and Style* VII, 4 (Fall, 1974), 227-234; see also Viktor Shklovsky, “Art as Technique,” in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, ed. and trans. by Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965).

<sup>22</sup> See Rachel Leket, “Inside Jean des Esseintes’ Inner Sanctum” (in Hebrew), in Joris-Karl Huysmans, *À Rebours*, trans. by Benny Ziffer (Jerusalem: Carmel, 1998), 204-207.

generated from organic decomposition; and, more generally, elements of misogyny, perversion, and orientalism.<sup>23</sup>

Generally, then, the Decadent attitude in literature is characteristically nihilist, individualistic and hedonistic; it is at once both immoralist and amoralist, both fascinated with the beauty of evil and seeking to sever altogether the linkage between the 'artistic', the 'beautiful', the 'pure of form' – and the moral, the good, the emotional/affective. Significantly, it has been claimed that the Decadent attitude is symptomatic of moments of cultural transition, in which it sees the catastrophic exhaustion of a dying culture while looking 'around the corner' for its replacement.<sup>24</sup> In principle, this pessimistic reaction of the Decadents to cultural transition resembles that of their harsh critic Spengler. This ironic affinity is indicative of the interconnectedness of cultural pessimistic tropes, and will inform the literary discussion in the third section below.

### Degeneration

The term 'degeneration' appears in Western culture much later than the term 'decadence'. In fifteenth-century Latin the verb *degenerare* had meant debasement and so the adjective *degeneratis* 'no longer of its kind', or 'fallen from its state at birth'. It appeared originally as a pessimistic assumption about the nature of history, akin to decadence in assuming that culture is ultimately irredeemable. The advent of degeneration as a biological term – with its invocation of nature and natural species and hence its scientific appeal – only occurred in the eighteenth century, and that was the context in which it was employed until the early twentieth century.<sup>25</sup> The pseudo-scientific discourse of degeneration assimilated into it other developments in the natural sciences.

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<sup>23</sup> Charles Bernheimer, *Decadent Subjects: The Idea of Decadence in Art, Literature, Philosophy, and Culture of the Fin de Siècle in Europe*, ed. by T. Jefferson Kline and Naomi Schor (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 102.

<sup>24</sup> Nicholas Zurbrugg, "Beyond Decadence: Huysmans, Wilde, Baudrillard and Postmodern Culture," in Michael St. John (ed.), *Romancing Decay: Ideas of Decadence in European Culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), 210-212; Zurbrugg relies on Renato Poggioli, *The Poets of Russia 1890-1930* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972), 80-88 passim.

<sup>25</sup> For the orthodox interpretations of biological degeneration see: Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder, c. 1848-c. 1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

Darwinian evolution theory was suggestively usurped to 'justify' the managed 'survival of the fittest' within human society to ensure human development. Likewise, entropy in the second law of thermodynamics was misinterpreted as affirming the doomed fate of the earth in 'heat death'; as a metaphor entropy was further misinterpreted as the wasting away of order and energy, a general 'degeneration' of existence.

Until the 1940s the Nazis also used the term 'degeneration'. Informing the malign political modernism of Nazism, race theory (accounting for biological degeneration) and cultural degeneration were two complementary elements, akin in their degenerationist outlook. The centrality of culture as ideology, which Terry Eagleton called the 'Ideology of the Aesthetic', was a similar and specific German characteristic.<sup>26</sup> This is evident as far back as Winckelmann's neo-classicism and Friedrich Schlegel's romanticism and their respective uses of the term 'degeneration', and most prominently in Max Nordau's indictment of his contemporary culture in *Entartung* (1895, translated into English as *Degeneration*, 1896).

Cultural degeneration is a prime example of the fallacy of indistinctness between individual and social degeneration, essentially the metaphorical blow-up of the personal to the scale of the universal, making the token an entire type. This was attributed to the suggestive functions of degeneration as 'generative metaphor' (according to Stuart C. Gilman) and 'explanatory myth' (according to William Greenslade).<sup>27</sup> Discussing Nordau's *Entartung*, Alison Hennegan suggests that degeneration "is a way of thinking tailored for those who seek scapegoats, who require always to be allowed to believe that danger can be kept out," and so *Entartung* was timely in offering "one man's passionately expressed prejudices and a popularizing digest of currently fashionable theories."<sup>28</sup> Nordau's vitriol was directed at his contemporaries, 'Decadents and aesthetes'

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<sup>26</sup> Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

<sup>27</sup> Stuart C. Gilman, "Political Theory and Degeneration: From Left to Right, from Up to Down," in Chamberlin and Gilman (eds.), 167; William Greenslade, *Degeneration, Culture and the Novel 1880-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 15.

<sup>28</sup> Alison Hennegan, "Personalities and Principles: Aspects of Literature and Life in *fin-de-siècle* England," in *Fin de Siècle and Its Legacy*, ed. by Mikulás Teich and Roy Porter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 189.



such as Nietzsche, Tolstoy, Ibsen and particularly Wilde, seen as a charismatic corruptor who had betrayed his artistic calling for the role of seducer, turning his seduced acolytes into corrupting agents spreading the contagious disease of 'degeneration'.

In short, degeneration is a biological interpretation of the concept of decadence, pinning the blame for social or cultural degradation, that is, of human behaviour, on a form of biological essentialism. The credibility which degenerationist theories enjoyed for several decades in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the result of an adoption of terminology from the natural sciences to apply to all social problems. It was also the expression of a progressivist confidence in the industrial revolution as a beneficial effect of the growth of science and technology, while explaining away its adverse social effects in urbanisation, pauperisation and criminality. Losing all serious credibility by the end of the Second World War, degenerationism will not be of much use to this study. It is nevertheless important to distinguish it from decadence as such, as another variety of cultural pessimism.

### Declinism

The impression or consciousness of living in a declining culture, inasmuch as it affects behaviour, has been described as declinism. In effect, declinism *is* cultural pessimism in its broadest sense, as an outlook, a worldview or a *mentalité* that shapes one's very perception of the world.<sup>29</sup> As *mentalité*, declinism reveals another side of cultural pessimism, that of a *Zeitgeist*, a generational spirit grounded in a shared, collective experience. Cultural pessimism is therefore historicised: it becomes a historical fact rather than merely a philosophical or psychological term. Moreover, as *mentalité*, declinism has a synthetic quality: it is not just a cognitive 'filter' of experience but also a principle by which it is understood.

Declinism is, then, clearly distinct from the more traditional terms of 'decadence' and 'degeneration', but many of its contemporary forms are informed by the metaphorical understanding of those terms or by their intellectual legacies. It is this broadest term that will be of most use to this thesis,

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. Peter Hennessy, *Having It So Good: Britain in the Fifties* (London: Allen Lane, 2006), 28.

binding together tropes of cultural pessimism into historically and socially specific narratives, and helping identify the values implicit in them.

## **Tropes of cultural pessimism**

To clarify the ways in which cultural pessimism manifests itself in modes of thought and expression, it is useful to expand on several main tropes of cultural pessimism that recur independently but in connection with the terms just discussed. There is no existing compendium of tropes of cultural pessimism and the four main tropes presented below have been collected in and through the preparation of this thesis.

A first trope of cultural pessimism to be considered is that of *belatedness*, being the feeling of living ‘late in history’, in an old world in which all has been seen and done before. Indeed, it is through the efforts of past generations that we have arrived to be and act in our own time – a feeling of indebtedness encapsulated in the suggestion (by the twelfth-century monk Joachim of Fiore) that we are ‘standing on the shoulders of giants’, and if we do see further it is thanks to this fact. The Joachite dictum is therefore ambivalent: on the one hand, the impression of command and abundance is significant, but on the other hand belatedness can be coloured by a feeling of destitution, of living past the end of a great age. Martin L. Davies suggests that the sense of indebtedness to the past is the basis for reactionary politics (indeed, that is its most common manifestation) and also for the cult of heritage, a fetish of origins interpreted as an attempt to compensate with conservation for belatedness itself, taken to be lacking and guilty.<sup>30</sup>

A second prevalent trope of cultural pessimism has its roots in imperial Rome and the term *panem et circenses*, or ‘*bread and circuses*’, originally the populist devices employed by Augustus Caesar to pacify Rome’s citizens and fortify his rule. A seminal work of scholarship elaborating on the modern turns of the ‘bread and circuses’ metaphor is Patrick Brantlinger’s eponymous book. In his study, Brantlinger takes ‘bread and circuses’ as the metaphor it has become.

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<sup>30</sup> Martin L. Davies, “The Lateness of the World, or How to Leave the Twentieth Century,” in St. John (ed.), 251-252.

Therefore, the critical understanding of a democratised or ‘mass’ culture and its agents as a form of social decay is at the heart of the book, taking the form of what he dubs ‘negative classicism’: the notion that the past is not only the positive model for modernity but also in the decadence of imperial Rome its negative template.<sup>31</sup> Thus, for example, commercial mass media such as television have become the contemporary emblems of the fragmentation, privatisation, and moral and intellectual degradation of their audiences.

The trope of belatedness is distinct from our third trope of cultural pessimism, which regards not simply junctures late in history, but precisely the event of the end of history, of *apocalypse*, and of theologies of the end, that is, *eschatologies*. This gives voice to more than just what Frank Kermode had called ‘the sense of an ending’. If the present’s belatedness charges it from the past, apocalyptic narratives – be they religious (the opening of the seven seals), secularised (nuclear catastrophe) or somewhere in between (millennialism) – indict it from the future, in fact from beyond the future, from beyond history. As such, apocalyptic narratives are not just formidable in themselves, as a horrible end envisioned, but also as a last judgment of all that is, or starts, today. The figure of apocalypse is, for example, part of what endows the contemporary literary dystopias of Wells, Kafka, Huxley or Orwell with their evocative force.

A fourth, and rarer, trope of cultural pessimism, which seems by its logic to be the most recent, is that of *retrogression*, or the undoing of progress, experienced as *disillusionment* with progress itself. Sometimes this takes the form of what Herman called ‘historical pessimism’: disappointment with human (or national, or classical) record that leads the observer to consistently anticipate failure and dysfunction, indeed to fatalism.<sup>32</sup> This disenchantment can also be brought about through the removal of a sense of continuity of identity, a severance of ties to the past and to past ways of life.<sup>33</sup> This breach can be a catastrophic event, as with France’s ‘strange defeat’ of 1940, but it can also be a

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<sup>31</sup> Patrick Brantlinger, *Bread and Circuses: Theories of Mass Culture as Social Decay* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), 17.

<sup>32</sup> Inasmuch as this dysfunction is lateness itself, Davies sees it as a form of belatedness. In general, however, the fatalism of disillusionment has broader foundations, and this goes to demonstrate the interconnectedness of tropes of cultural pessimism. Davies, 253.

<sup>33</sup> Bennett, 9.

process of dissipation, like the erosion of authority of grand narratives in Lyotard's 'postmodern condition'. The loss of faith in progress can also inspire a search for compensations in fantasy and nostalgia, or to embittered cynicism regarding progress.<sup>34</sup> Temperamentally such disappointment is not merely lamented but also experienced with the rage and self-recrimination of the undeceived.

Talk of continuity and breach, transformation and novelty in tropes of cultural pessimism, that is, a historical survey of them, is meaningless outside of historically situated narratives that employ them, usually in combination. Postwar declinist narratives relating to the unprecedented circumstances of the nuclear age can, for example, seem wholly novel. In fact, the tropes of belatedness, disillusionment and apocalypticism that recur in such narratives situate them within wider European and Western traditions of thought. These tropes also link declinist narratives to other discourses through which they, and cultural pessimism as a whole, can also be explored.

## **Relevance of cultural pessimism**

Introducing a psychological study of optimism and pessimism, Edward C. Chang suggests that "it is the power of possibility that represents an important determination of who and what we are and how we exist in the world."<sup>35</sup> The question of general pessimism, and thus of cultural pessimism, is therefore largely a question of perceived possibilities.<sup>36</sup> The idea of decline, which underlies the attitude of cultural pessimism, is often introduced as a lack, as 'the reverse of Progress' or the absence of cultural optimism. It is the logical consequence of the construction (or assumption) of the ideal reality of Progress, as central to the Enlightenment project, to secular humanism, to modernity, and therefore to Western identity at large. Just as the added meanings attached to the

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<sup>34</sup> Joe Bailey, *Pessimism* (London: Routledge, 1988), 42-43.

<sup>35</sup> Chang links this to the influence of Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1927) on postwar philosophy, theology and psychology. Edward C. Chang (ed.), *Optimism & Pessimism: Implications for Theory, Research, and Practice* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2001), 4.

<sup>36</sup> Bailey's *Pessimism* is an illuminating source on general pessimism.

idea of Progress can be the source of positive motivation, so the possibility of decline, or of any non-progression, becomes a menacing eventuality, a source for discontent and a negative motivation.<sup>37</sup> Thus, in a culture premised on Progress as a descriptive *and* normative state of affairs, the very possibility of decline becomes almost taboo, that which is beyond the pale.

Progress gives rise to its own discontents, in particular to 'technological pessimism'. The mystification of the old 'mechanical arts' as modern 'technology', invested with Enlightenment social hopes made it an idealised entity, an agent of the faith in human improvement through objective, certain knowledge. The souring of technological optimism can understandably be the source of great despair: for their very success and pervasiveness, science and technology have had adverse effects that become particularly alarming in the awareness of our dependence on them and relative ignorance of them.<sup>38</sup> Thus, technological pessimism tends toward fatalism, acquiescing with the historical determinism of technology, as the ideal that replaced the just republican society.<sup>39</sup> To some, this technological pessimism blurs earlier distinctions between private and public spheres, and a symptom of the frustrated hope of escaping the exercise of fallible, contingent human judgment in politics through depersonalised determination of 'the public interest'.<sup>40</sup>

The bulk of what is considered the pessimist tradition in social philosophy is reflected in conservative (Burke, Tocqueville) and neo-conservative (Leo Strauss, Fukuyama) thought. Yet other pessimist interpretations, while embedded in traditionalist or conservative viewpoints, also have a revolutionary side to them, as exemplified by Spengler's flirt with German national socialism. The Nazis had a new utopia to offer, albeit one imbued with traditional imagery, and like other utopias it appealed to a public

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<sup>37</sup> See introduction to Robert Nisbet, *The History of the Idea of Progress* (New York: Basic Books, 1980).

<sup>38</sup> Bennett, 113-122.

<sup>39</sup> Leo Marx, "The Idea of 'Technology' and Postmodern Pessimism," in Yaron Ezrahi, Everett Mendelsohn and Howard Segal (eds.), *Technology, Pessimism, and Postmodernism* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994), 11-28.

<sup>40</sup> Yaron Ezrahi, "Technology and the Illusion of the Escape from Politics," in Ezrahi, Mendelsohn and Segal (eds.), 29-37.

craving social transformation. Conservatives and revolutionaries have more in common than just this, but pessimism is an illustrative nexus for the two, as will be discussed in part one below.

Darker versions of cultural pessimism lack the utopian horizon of redemption, and their apocalyptic overtones contribute to the image of their proponents as Cassandras. What remains sometimes is a cultural pessimism confined to nostalgia, locating its frame of reference not in a hypothetical future but in a bygone past, or rather, in its idealisation. After all, the nostalgic recollection is a displacement: the lived past is the material of nostalgia, but nostalgia is not its product. Nostalgia taps into the same anxieties over continuity of identity so central to cultural pessimism: to compensate for transition and discontinuity, nostalgia refines and rehabilitates aspects of past experiences and of our former selves.<sup>41</sup> Yet persistent, unresolved nostalgia indicates not only a lack of a vision for the future (and a ‘constructed’ grasp of the past) but a failure to grapple with the present. By extension, adds Ian Wright, “the idea of ‘the tradition’ is a reflex of the intellectual’s inability to live fully in his own present.”<sup>42</sup> As such, nostalgia feeds back into pessimist conservatism, and its compelling benchmarks are akin to Brantlinger’s ‘negative classicism’.

In the face of ‘certain’ decline, pessimism throws up questions of redemption and utopianism, of thinking beyond decline. As a critical outlook it presents an uncompromising will to transcendence, which in cultural pessimism is also translated into a *political* will to *collective* transcendence. Not all forms of cultural pessimism are devoid of the possibility of redemption: nevertheless, redemptive or not, they address the horizon of expectations, Chang’s ‘power of possibility’, regarding a present decline. As Ilan Gur-Ze’ev suggests, “the present state is understood in consistent pessimism as a *flawed death*, and so the struggle against it is the expression of *real life*.”<sup>43</sup> More’s original Utopia was itself

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<sup>41</sup> Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia* (New York: The Free Press, 1979), 8-9, 34, 44.

<sup>42</sup> Wright refers to Leavis’s idea of ‘the Great Tradition’ of English literature and dedicates his article to contextualising it. Ian Wright, “F.R. Leavis, the *Scrutiny* Movement and the Crisis,” in *Culture and Crisis in Britain in the Thirties*, ed. by Jon Clark, Margot Heinemann, David Margolies and Carole Snee (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1979), 50, 64 n.53.

<sup>43</sup> Gur-Ze’ev, 13 (my translation and emphases).

conjured up as a pessimistic response to the political mayhem of his age, and so cultural pessimism can be said to have a strong connection to the utopian tradition.

## ***Context: places and times***

### **Comparative periodisation**

Facing the challenge of periodisation, John Brannigan argues that “the problem with periodicity, with certain received ideas of literary history, is an overdependency upon an uncritical narrative structure which posits a recognizable origin or turning point, followed by a teleological progression of literary events, leading inevitably to our situation in the present.”<sup>44</sup> To Brannigan as to the present cultural study, the received label ‘postwar’ should be questioned and reasoned independently, as a period in cultural, particularly literary history.

This thesis emerged from an interest in the immediate postwar period ending with ‘the Sixties’, a period hardly discussed with regard to cultural pessimism. However, whereas the British ended the war when they ceased fighting, in August 1945, and while French troops contributed to the final submission of Germany, the gradual liberation of France, already begun in 1944, did not conclude definitively until May 1945. This year’s gap is not negligible, considering the amount of political and intellectual purges the newly liberated managed to execute during the *épuration*.

However, this study contends that the war’s end is of secondary importance here, as there was no significant *cultural* turnaround triggered specifically by the *end* of the war. Newly emergent trends and cultural phenomena occurred in the immediate postwar years either as a result of processes which had started before or during the war, or entirely after it, or yet completely independently of it. The time of the Second World War itself was culturally important to postwar reality as a considerably influential period with many delayed effects; but to this cultural study it is important as a period, a transition, a watershed, rather than the single event of its end. Therefore, this

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<sup>44</sup> John Brannigan, *Orwell to the Present: Literature in England, 1945-2000* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 9.

study will acknowledge rather than try to reconcile the different ‘ends of war’ in Britain and France. This temporal difference will be obscured by the growing relevance of wartime and interwar events as touchstones in the context of cultural pessimism.

Placing the other temporal boundary in the early- or mid-1960s introduces similar disparities of comparison. In Britain, its defining end could be the 1963 breakthrough of the Beatles, signifying the undisputed arrival of a new wave of mainstream youth culture. This could be coupled with Harold Wilson’s electoral victory of 1964, a political shift brought on by an anticipation of change and liberalisation. In France, two obvious watersheds of the 1960s are the 1968 *événements* and the 1962 Evian accords, ending the war in Algeria and leading to its independence. Decolonisation forced a reconsideration of French collective identity as a culture, a nation, and a disintegrating empire – a painful experience at the time and a sobering legacy. In a culture that values its intellectuals, the mid-1960s are also important as the high point of structuralism and the beginnings of post-structuralism, both trends also being national products enjoying particular success abroad.

In existing scholarship on postwar experiences in Britain and France there are already several accepted periodisations, predominantly along political lines. In Britain these include the Labour victory of 1945; the ousting of Attlee’s reconstruction government in 1951; the Suez affair of 1956; and Labour’s return to office in 1964. In France a similar pattern emerges, with histories dedicated to the Fourth Republic (1946-1958), to the De Gaulle presidency (1958-1969), or to colonial conflicts in Indochina and in Algeria as discrete periods. Another prominent definition is the *trente glorieuses*, the thirty glorious years (1944-1974) of reconstruction, *mutation sociale* and growing affluence, ending with the first world oil crisis and Giscard d’Estaing’s election.<sup>45</sup> Still, as contended above, political points of reference are of limited import to this cultural study and cannot serve as its sole periodising principle.

Other common modes of periodisation are similarly inadequate for a study of culture. Looking at decades seems plainly arbitrary. Culture does not

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<sup>45</sup> Jean Fourastié, *Les Trente glorieuses, ou la révolution invisible de 1946 à 1975* (Paris: Fayard, 1979).



follow the pattern of decades, and the addition of a definite article to a decade is misleading in suggesting it has an essence, an overarching *Zeitgeist*. That *Zeitgeist*, endowed in retrospect (usually by people who ‘weren’t there’), specifically in popular memory manipulated by the popular media, is prone to Americanisation, making ‘the fifties’ years of wholesome, clean-cut conservatism, and ‘the sixties’ years of free-loving, optimistic hippie high times. As Kermode points out, thinking in decades does allow us to define time, to endow it with some finitude which will let us parcel and label it.<sup>46</sup> This gives a welcome sense of certainty with regard to time (including the tensual compartments of past and future), but following it would lead too easily to a mimetic fallacy – to seeing, as cultural pessimist arguments often do, signs in the times – so it is best avoided.

Initially, ‘the postwar years’ seem to be fuzzily defined by an in-between generation, since we already have a more definite idea of what had occurred before then (the war) and what happened afterwards (‘the Sixties’, ‘the postmodern world’). Reference to a ‘postwar generation’ as definitive of the period is misleading, not just because generations simply deflect the question of definition, but also because a period frames more than one particular age group. If anything, the people we see as producers or consumers of culture are defined by *not* being of a certain age group: they were born before or during the war, and so were *not* born into a state of affairs already altered by it.

It would thus make sense to frame, albeit loosely, the years – about two decades – during which the cultural spheres in Britain and France were generated by (and largely for) people who were all born before the end of the war, but not yet by the ‘baby boomers’ born after it. This definition has much to do with personal experience: while the first ‘baby boomers’ only matured in the early 1960s, the cultural production of the immediate postwar period was left to people with a broader perspective on the new conditions emerging in the late 1940s and 1950s. These were people shaped by the economic depression of the 1930s, by political extremism, and by wartime shortages and horrors – and who did not therefore take for granted the slow postwar reconstruction, modernisation and

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<sup>46</sup> Kermode, 7, 16-17.

eventual affluence. This study is about them, their cultures, and their tropes of cultural pessimism.

The rough framing of this study's period from the mid-1940s to the mid-1960s allows me to examine those tropes. Born in different times, the people whose works will be discussed below have the advantage of experience and perspective, of not taking postwar conditions for granted. It is through this experience that sense is made of both the persistence of some cultural phenomena and of the novelty of others. It helps to contextualise the cultures of 'the postwar' and to better understand this important interim.

### **France and Britain: similarities and peculiarities**

As suggested above, there are several major similarities between the processes undergone by France and Britain after the Second World War. These serve as the basis for further comparison and their discussion will introduce our common terms of reference in the postwar experience.

#### War and reconstruction

Only after the war did it become widely apparent that this was a new age of man-made catastrophes, which had reached the point of genocide and the possibility of total human annihilation. Accounts of Nazi concentration camps travelled back to France and Britain through troops and press reports, and through returning camp survivors, living proofs of the horrors epitomised by Auschwitz. If Auschwitz happened 'elsewhere', then the American nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to force Japanese capitulation must have initially seemed entirely other-worldly. The message to Japan resonated globally, heralding a nuclear age and new understandings of peace and of security. In that sense, the initial postwar period was dominated by images of Auschwitz (symbolising the Holocaust) and Hiroshima (symbolising indiscriminate nuclear destruction), reflecting a new scale of possible human catastrophes.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Ory suggests this regarding the first postwar decade in France. Pascal Ory, *L'Aventure culturelle Française 1945-1989* (Paris: Flammarion, 1989), 124.

More immediately, the Second World War had also considerably devastated and impoverished Britain and France. In France, material devastation was coupled by the shame of occupation and nationalist Vichy collaboration which, contrasted with the multitude of political and regional resistance organisations, created a picture of social fragmentation. In Britain, mass displacement in children's evacuations and conscript mobilisation was aggravated by great damage to bombed industrial cities and by a countryside torn by a web of defences in anticipation of a German land invasion. However, the fact that Britain was not invaded and occupied during the war allowed Churchill, the charismatic wartime prime minister, to define it as 'their finest hour', a time of great national pride. This was certainly not evident in France where, after the Liberation *épuration*, a benevolent 'victor's history' began to take hold, claiming that all France resisted occupation, except the misguided few. A first mental challenge to both postwar societies was therefore the challenge of stepping back from the brink: in France this was a challenge of cohabitation and fostering cohesion; in Britain it meant the translation of shared wartime heroism into a shared peacetime prosperity.

The new political order in postwar Britain and France, as almost everywhere else in Western Europe, included three major elements: social democracy (later dubbed the Third Force or Third Way), the welfare state, and consensus politics. Governments in both countries faced the task of stabilisation and reconstruction, steered by some version of socialism. In Britain's largely bipartite system, the 1945 mandate was handed over to Labour under Attlee, astonishing many including Churchill, who felt the people had been ungrateful to him. In France, after a short interregnum under General de Gaulle, power was transferred in 1946 to the elected assembly of the newly established Fourth Republic, governed by a coalition comprising the SFIO (socialists), MRP (Christian centre), and PCF (communists), from which the communists were soon to be ousted. Over the 12 years of the Fourth Republic, the same familiar politicians replaced each other as premiers and cabinet members, contributing throughout its 26 governments and 21 premierships to a general sense of stability, if not stagnation. The British face of consensus politics only became apparent in the 1950s, after Attlee's tenure had transformed the state and its economy: the general agreement between Labour and Conservatives to build on

Attlee's achievements soon gained the name 'Butskellism', mocking the agreement between the Labour chairman Hugh Gaitskell and the Conservative grandee RAB Butler.

The greatest leap in postwar British and French reconstruction was in the reordering of their economies, to a great degree as modern welfare states. The British blueprint for such transformation was already present during the war. The 1942 Beveridge Report defined 'five giants' to battle as part of a 'British New Deal': Want, to be remedied by a universal social security scheme; Disease, to be defeated with a new National Health Service; Ignorance, to be addressed by free secondary education until the age of 15; Squalor, to be remedied by a housing drive (which also had to redress a housing shortage due to bombardments); and Idleness, which was to be done away with through a 'full employment' policy. These principles were assimilated in the Labour programme of 1945 as 'Beveridge, plus Keynes, plus socialism.'<sup>48</sup> Yet Labour's transformative agenda also included elements less acceptable to its Conservative opposition, like nationalisation of major infrastructures (e.g. coal, steel, railroads) and the establishment of public boards for the state to manage them at arm's length.

In France the Third Republic's legacy of social legislation was burdened by the war and by a largely agrarian economy. The psychological thrust of the French anti-Nazi struggle was channelled domestically into a fight not only against political corruption (Vichy and its supporters), but also against the accumulated backwardness, deficiencies, instability and imbalance of France's old liberal capitalist economy.<sup>49</sup> The *économie dirigée* was the order of the day, and thanks to prudent economic planning under Jean Monnet's two five-year *plans de modernisation et d'équipement* (1947-52, 1953-58), to American financial aid through the Blum-Byrnes agreement and to industrial instruction in 'rationalising' the six designated development sectors (coal, steel, cement, electricity, transport, and farm machinery), France got a head start in postwar

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<sup>48</sup> Hennessy, 22-24. Most of these policies had precedents, but not to this extent; Arthur Marwick, *British Society since 1945*, 4<sup>th</sup> rev. ed. (London: Penguin, 2003 [1982]), 28 (henceforth: Marwick, *Society*).

<sup>49</sup> Richard F. Kuisel, *Capitalism and the State in Modern France: Renovation and Economic Management in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 188 (henceforth: Kuisel, *Capitalism*).

reconstruction.<sup>50</sup> This planned liberal economy was guided by the need for economic stability, which was necessary to increase France's productive capacities; by some wish for social justice and solving capitalist inequalities; and mainly by the compelling desire for growth and breaking through economic backwardness, by whichever name: 'modernisation,' 'efficiency,' 'productivity,' or 'standard of living'.<sup>51</sup>

The reconstruction efforts in Britain and France were generally successful and by the end of the 1950s more people lived in greater material comfort. Yet they began in the late 1940s and early 1950s with some sweeping and unpopular belt-tightening moves. The promise of prosperity was not enough to pacify the frustration of initial hopes for a fast transformation at the end of a long war and, for those who could remember them, after the impoverished, fractious and violent 1930s.<sup>52</sup> Instead, the political map remained largely the same: the French Fourth Republic was built in the image of the radical Third Republic, and British politics continued to reflect class and regional distinctions and deference to traditional authority. Wartime shortages persisted in peacetime: initial French redistribution of provisions angered farmers and left townsfolk wanting, while British rationing lasted until the mid-1950s, being at some early stages even more restrictive than during the war. It was the anticipation of change in 1945 that led to Labour's election into office, and in turn it was popular dissatisfaction with the pace of change that led to its replacement in 1951.

The new postwar social-economic order created new social realities and new social types. The effect of modernisation and welfare structures was a popular 'bourgeoisification'. This phenomenon, dubbed 'affluence' in Britain, amounted to the growing feeling and reality of prosperity, especially among the

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<sup>50</sup> The Blum-Byrnes agreement of 1946 cancelled France's wartime lend-lease bill of two billion dollars, gave it a further international credit of 650 million dollars, and added a 720 million dollar allowance on American surplus – for which France had to cancel its protective tariffs against American imports and abandon its price-equalisation procedures. Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press/October Books, 1995), 37, 202 n.25 – henceforth: Ross, *Fast Cars*.

<sup>51</sup> Kuisel, *Capitalism*, 275-278.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Kristin Ross, "French Quotidian," in *The Art of the Everyday: the Quotidian in Postwar French Culture*, ed. by Lynn Gumpert (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 20.

lower social strata. In the interwar years much of the working class was in partial or no employment, forcing many into casual criminality for mere survival. Indeed, the British political elites of the 1930s feared a popular uprising due to the great economic disparities. The postwar 'new' or 'affluent' working class was effectively the old working class, expanded thanks to full employment policies, which together with health and education provisions resulted in growing incomes and more spending power, and seemingly in greater opportunities for social mobility based on personal merit, blurring old class boundaries.

The 'third industrial revolution' of postwar France created new social mobility opportunities through the American-inspired growth of *cadres* (middle management) and through new requirements for individual professionalisation, enabling younger people to break away from bondage to the family business. A broad 'national middle class' was effectively created by modernisation, a mainstream of complacent urban professionals, defined mainly by their purchasing power and consumer habits, and making France a bourgeois 'democracy of consumption', a mere 'alibi of a class society.'<sup>53</sup> Yet even in this improved state of affairs distribution of wealth remained uneven and the increased opportunities for social mobility were mostly illusory, mainly affecting the younger generation, as shown below and in section 3.

### Decolonisation and imperial dismantling

While seeing their respective imperial roles as beacons of civilisation, France and Britain translated that notion into differing values, administrative structures, and approaches to colonialism. Generally, the British imperial tradition had sought to establish an association of the colonies with Britain that would keep the various imperial inhabitants in their territories, exploiting their labour in exchange for provision of European-style modernisation, trade and maintenance of the peace. Following its republican tradition, France saw its imperial exploits as an emancipation of the colonised: the colonised were expected to take on French

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<sup>53</sup> Ross, *Fast Cars*, 1-14.

culture and 'universal' values, and consequently to assimilate into the French polity at large.<sup>54</sup>

These premises help explain differences between French and British attitudes to decolonisation. If to the French colonisation was emancipatory and progressive, they treated secessionist tendencies and colonial independence movements as reactionary, offending the very kernel of the French Republic. At the end of the Second World War liberated France faced colonial insurrections and reasserted its imperial authority through colonial 'pacification' campaigns, most notably in Madagascar, Indochina and Algeria. Britain had had to negotiate colonial secessionism since the mid-nineteenth century and slowly formed a system of Dominions and then the Commonwealth, smoothing and decelerating devolution of power and maintaining links with devolved territories. In fact, the rigid French imperial assimilationism, along with its ideational and institutional underpinnings, was bound to make French decolonisation a painful, complex and profoundly divisive process, in ways that Britain simply did not have to face; British imperial associationism had been more flexible, and in any case the ardent nationalist opposition faced by Britain did not result in major large-scale wars as it did for France in Indochina and Algeria.<sup>55</sup>

The two states dealt rather differently with their changing imperial circumstances in the wake of war. The doggedly imperialist stance of Bevin was overruled by Attlee, his prime minister, and several territories across the Middle East and Asia (Palestine, India) were ceded in the interest of stabilising the domestic British economy. Colonial garrisons and administrations were too expensive and too troublesome to maintain, and Attlee believed Britain was better off without them. Subsequent Conservative governments upheld this line of reasoning, despite the Conservatives being traditionally 'the party of empire', led by imperialists like Churchill and Eden. Macmillan, a realist like Attlee, even carried out the first cost-benefit analysis of the British Empire.<sup>56</sup> The French

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<sup>54</sup> Robert and Isabelle Tombs, *That Sweet Enemy: The French and the British from the Sun King to the Present* (London: William Heinemann, 2006), 612.

<sup>55</sup> Tony Smith, "A Comparative Study of French and British Decolonization," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 20, 1 (January 1978), 71.

<sup>56</sup> Hennessy, 39. However, this analysis did *not* suggest that in any colony or overall the cost of empire outweighed its benefits.

resistance to decolonisation was not just a principled rejection but a product of the inability of successive Fourth Republic governments to lead major policy changes: too weak an executive and too fragmented a National Assembly both clung to an ungovernable and outdated imperial structure, prized as the basis for French international *grandeur*.<sup>57</sup> The Mendès-France government policy affirmed this synthetic unity by reasoning the separation from Indochina in 1954 with a consolidation of its colonial assets elsewhere, particularly in Africa, showing a clear retrenchment in its regard to colonial home rule and to the definition of the French Union itself (then still including French Algeria).<sup>58</sup>

A major crisis of decolonisation for both empires, and a major blow to their self-image as still-great empires, came with the Suez crisis. Following the 1952 nationalist coup, Egypt under president Nasser had promoted itself in the Arab world as a regional leader, promoting pan-Arabism, strengthening ties with the USSR and generally defying British interests in the area, until finally nationalising the Suez Canal in July 1956. Eden, who regarded Nasser as a new Hitler, conspired with Mollet's government in France and with Ben-Gurion's government in Israel to stage an Israeli attack on Egypt which would 'oblige' the French and British to intervene militarily. This was disastrously executed in October 1956, taking both the USSR and the United States by surprise. President Eisenhower was particularly enraged at Eden's deception and threatened to refuse a loan to Britain, putting the entire Sterling area in danger of collapse. A weak Eden conceded, announced (without consulting Mollet) a hasty ceasefire and withdrawal of British forces, and promptly resigned.

For both France and Britain this was a resounding defeat and a spectacular revelation of their weakness as world powers. In both countries, public opinion was divided regarding the importance of the Suez operation – when, that is, it was not wholly indifferent to it.<sup>59</sup> For some people, Suez crystallised the need to shrink the imperial project; in France, after losing Indochina, its richest colony and a test-case for containment of colonial nationalism, it stiffened the resolve of leaders like Mollet and Gaillard to crush

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<sup>57</sup> Smith, 79-80.

<sup>58</sup> Rod Kedward, *La Vie en Bleu: France and the French since 1900* (London: Allen Lane, 2005), 371.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Kedward, 375; Hewison, 127-129.



the emerging Algerian revolt.<sup>60</sup> This Algerian fixation and lack of political solutions for it (barring independence) hastened the Fourth Republic's demise and the quasi-monarchist restoration of De Gaulle following the 1958 referendum. The French public yearned for alternatives to break the political stalemate, and de Gaulle was expected to somehow resolve the Algerian War, which was beginning to spill into metropolitan France through the activities of OAS, the armed *colon* underground. OAS actions and the war itself escalated as De Gaulle indicated in late 1960 that independence might be inevitable, but a political conclusion did not arrive until early 1962 with the Evian accords, which bundled Algerian nationalism through independence together with the preservation of French interests in the new state (e.g. rights for the *colons*, Saharan oil, trade privileges). However, the clear impression that France conceded in Algeria out of weakness, because it could not hold its ground, was a major blow to the image of French imperial grandeur.

Alongside and beyond decolonisation, domestic societies in France and Britain were affected by the influx of colonial immigration. Many immigrants filled demand for unskilled, underpaid labour for the expanding industrial sector and in urban and infrastructure development. While there was no official policy of segregation or ghettoisation, these immigrant populations congregated in separate, usually run down urban areas, in France even forming their own *bidonvilles* (shanty towns). Until 1964, when the French government resolved to clear *bidonvilles*, 75,000 people, mostly immigrants from the Maghreb, lived there.<sup>61</sup> Successive postwar British governments were troubled by immigration demographics, increasingly returning to the question of the number of non-white immigrants that Britain could assimilate.<sup>62</sup> Colonial immigration into Britain was indeed significant and growing: in 1951 there had been 36,000 non-white immigrants in Britain; by the end of that decade, the same amount were arriving

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<sup>60</sup> On Indochina's importance, its loss, and the impact of France's provisional government on colonial policy, see: Martin Shipway, *The Road to War: France and Vietnam, 1944-1947* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2003 [1996]), 1-5.

<sup>61</sup> Kedward, 411.

<sup>62</sup> James Hampshire, *Citizenship and Belonging: Immigration and the Politics of Demographic Governance in Postwar Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 60.

there annually.<sup>63</sup> Prompted by concerns for limits to non-white immigration, the last Macmillan government was the first to cap migrant figures with the 1962 Commonwealth Immigration Act.

In restricting immigration, the Macmillan government was concerned with the ways in which it was seen to grate against the native white population of Britain, in particular, as Butler presented it to cabinet, in competition over housing, jobs and women.<sup>64</sup> What had prompted government action was the eruption of race riots in Nottingham's St. Anne's Well and in London's Notting Hill in summer 1958. The government surprise at the riots probably attests to its lack of awareness of popular white reactions to immigrants and immigration; yet it was only later in the 1960s that this hatred found a political outlet. In France, by the mid-1950s pro-colonialist sentiment regarding Algeria compounded with other forms of French imperialist xenophobia and veteran militant feeling. Epitomising this approach was Pierre Poujade, founder of the surprisingly popular UDCA movement, representing small provincial artisans and traders who presumed to speak for *la vieille France* and who cloaked their xenophobia with patriotism. UDCA was a runaway success, gaining 52 Assembly seats in the 1955 elections, but soon losing them due to its narrow, chiefly economic, political programme.<sup>65</sup>

### Cold War and American predominance

After the First World War American influence began to develop but it was curbed by relative American isolationism. After its intervention in the Second World War, the United States revealed itself as a major player in world politics and a military force to be reckoned with. In the immediate aftermath of war it

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<sup>63</sup> Dominic Sandbrook, *Never Had It So Good: A History of Britain from Suez to the Beatles* (London: Abacus, 2006 [2005]), 314.

<sup>64</sup> Hennessy, 500.

<sup>65</sup> Kedward, 377-378. Among UDCA's elected representatives was a young Jean-Marie le Pen, later leader of the radical right-wing Front National. Barthes's *Mythologies* is suffused throughout with cultural contradictions highlighted by French decolonisation, but he dedicates two essays in particular ('Quelques paroles de M. Poujade' and 'Poujade et les intellectuels') to Poujade's own typically fascist view of (intellectual) culture as a malady; Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Seuil/Pierres Vives, 1957), 96-98, 205-212.

showed itself crucial to the reconstruction of Europe and to the setting of a new world order. Economically, American leadership reasserted itself in the Bretton Woods system which, with the dollar and dollar convertibility as its basis (rather than the gold standard), established a co-ordinated system of national monetary policies and mutual aid through dedicated institutions like the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). System participants were all on the American-led allied side during the war, and strengthened the already established role of the United States as bloc leader. When the two nuclear powers, the United States and the USSR, turned on each other at the end of the war, American leadership of the allied bloc was reaffirmed in political terms. This effectively relegated Britain and France to a secondary position within the 'free' West.

British and French reliance on American financial aid in the early postwar years was desperate. While national reconstruction efforts and rationing regimes were implemented, the damaged infrastructure, housing and food shortages resulted in national crises. British and French colonies no longer provided sufficient support for reconstruction, with some of them turning into political liabilities. To complicate matters, the harsh winter of 1946-7 taxed national resources further, leading Britain to unilaterally suspend coal supply to France, which relied predominantly on coal for energy. French resentment grew two years later, when Attlee devalued the Pound without warning, affecting British-French trade and leading France to look to Germany for the bulk of its foreign trade.<sup>66</sup> The unreliability and inadequacy of British and French resources, together with fear of encroachment of Soviet power in Western Europe, prompted the United States in summer 1947 to offer a comprehensive financial aid plan, the Marshall Plan, for European states within its sphere of influence. Britain and then France were by far the major beneficiaries, and for France this supplemented the aforementioned Blum-Byrnes agreements.

American intervention in France and Britain was as much political as it was economic. The Cold War paradigm of the 'free West' severely limited the legitimacy of radical left political action, particularly organised Communist activity, in both countries. Beyond their internationalism, Communists were

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<sup>66</sup> Tombs, 607.

suspected of taking their directions from Moscow, which was true to varying extents at least until Stalin's death in 1953. American intervention in internal British and French affairs was also covert: American funding propped up 'free-thinking' cultural enterprises such as the British journal *Encounter* or Radio Free Europe.<sup>67</sup> Still, the British Communist movement was relatively small and obscured in the political left by Labour, a party whose roots in Fabianism and Christian socialism were more local than internationalist. French communism was much more menacing to the United States: the *parti des fusillés* staked as potent a claim as De Gaulle's to the resistance narrative and, due to its electoral success after the war, claimed its place in the governing coalition. Various elements conspired to check PCF power: the party became the foil of Gaullist nationalist ambitions, and catalyst for early plans for a second National Assembly chamber.<sup>68</sup> Its ranks were infiltrated by CIA agents, and its increasingly uncompromising line under chairman Maurice Thorez, together with various disagreements among the trade unions, resulted in its dismissal from the Ramadier government in 1947.<sup>69</sup> Henceforth, the PCF remained in opposition, an agitating force that gradually lost its importance, most notably after the establishment of the Fifth Republic, when Gaullist presidential fiat dwarfed the legislature.

The Suez affair was a watershed in American relations with France and Britain. American intervention to halt the operation caused anger in both countries, but Eden's concession and resignation were also seen as his owning up to personal responsibility for a somewhat reckless move. His successor, Macmillan, was very careful to patch up relations with the United States and develop the bilateral 'special relationship'.<sup>70</sup> In the crumbling Fourth Republic no leader was inclined and empowered to do the same, certainly not de Gaulle, who carried on his anti-American attitude as president; this resulted in an impression of a French fall from favour with the United States, leading France to seek alternative solutions. As the Tombses put it, "for the British, Suez proved

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<sup>67</sup> See Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (London: Granta Books, 1999).

<sup>68</sup> Kedward, 356, 358.

<sup>69</sup> Kedward, 359-362.

<sup>70</sup> Sandbrook, 224-227.

that *only* America could be the buttress of their security, power and interests. For the French, Suez proved that America could *never* be that buttress.”<sup>71</sup> Britain and France were to continue developing their independent nuclear programmes, initiated by Attlee in 1949 and by Gaillard in 1952.

The issues on which Britain and France were most clearly at odds were regionalist, and regarded European trade and European defence. The United States did not oppose European regionalism, and in fact encouraged France, Britain and other Western European states to agree on their own mutual arrangements. In defence, the French swallowed a bitter pill when, on the establishment of NATO in spring 1949, effectively agreeing to the eventual rearmament and addition of Germany.<sup>72</sup> They attempted to compensate for this with a planned European Defence Community (EDC) for the six central European states, excluding Britain. However, the EDC treaty was failed by France itself as the National Assembly refused to ratify it: Gaullists feared it would harm French sovereignty and colonial interests in North Africa; the PCF saw it as a threat to regional peace; and Mendès-France, already associated with the failure of the Indochina War as one of its major critics and for ordering the retreat from Dien Bien Phu, offered only lukewarm support for the EDC.<sup>73</sup> In trade, European cooperation initiatives were more successful, beginning with the adoption of the Schumann Plan of 1950, maturing with the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community in the Treaty of Paris (1951), which also included a planned expansion of integration. Britain chose to stay out of the ECSC and preserve trade privileges with its empire and Commonwealth; this protectionism also kept it from later joining the European Economic Community, established in 1957 with the Treaty of Rome; but Britain still attempted to establish a foothold in European trade with its own proposal for a Free Trade Area, vetoed by de Gaulle but still established in 1959.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Tombs, 617-618.

<sup>72</sup> Tombs, 608.

<sup>73</sup> Kedward, 371.

<sup>74</sup> Tombs, 610-611, 620-622.

### 'Americanisation' and American cultural hegemony

The amazing American recovery from the great depression and its relative welfare during and after the Second World War were the envy of the declining European states. During postwar reconstruction they tried to emulate this success by adopting American industrial techniques. France led the way with the Monnet modernisation drive, sending functionaries and managers to the United States to study Taylorist 'rationalisation' of manufacturing processes and Fordist standardisation of mass production. Mass production assumed mass consumption, and since the sways of mass tastes were so influential, this required the services of market research companies, to better inform production, marketing and advertising. The American-assisted French leap soon left Britain behind: the French economy seemed not only richer but healthier and more geared to meet future challenges. By the late 1950s talk began of a *maladie anglaise*, a reluctance to change old ways, partly attributable to the lack of necessity to break with the past, which to France was cardinal, and partly to older hostilities toward industrialisation and its attendant social changes.<sup>75</sup>

Building on American-inspired production and marketing techniques, American culture – or at least what was perceived in Europe as 'American culture' – gained ground within British and French cultures. American cinema, radio and music (still broadcast in Europe through the American Forces Network), cars, home consumer goods like washing machines and refrigerators, and the entire American lifestyle furnished by them – all were increasingly taken up from the early 1950s onwards, when consumer choice and personal income levels grew noticeably. Together with mass production techniques which lowered product prices, and mass marketing that increased its availability, the American lifestyle became affordable to all. In seeking this 'affordable quality' and in catering for it, the model for both producers and consumers was, again, the United States, as the only industrial country with an established experience of a

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<sup>75</sup> This discourse went on for several decades after. Cf. Martin J. Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit 1850-1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Correlli Barnett, *The Audit of War* (London: Macmillan, 1986); Keith Robbins, "British Culture versus British Industry," in *Debates in Modern History: British Culture and Economic Decline*, ed. by Bruce Collins and Keith Robbins (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1990), 1-24.

capitalist working class-dominated market.<sup>76</sup> The hope that American-style prosperity would come by following an American example cast the United States as the face of the future; but also as a kind of mirror before which to preen, and through which to distinguish their cultural difference.<sup>77</sup>

Part of the European fascination with American popular culture was dedicated to the increasingly fashionable elements in it deriving from Black American or African-American culture. These included in particular the musical styles of jazz and blues and the dance routines and clothing fashions related to them. To some degree this fascination was primitivist and exoticist, and it also displaced the encounter with non-white and non-European culture to the convenient realm of American fantasies. This took place at a time when music and styles imported with immigrant populations were still resisted by national mainstreams: North African cultures in France, and West Indian and South Asian cultures in Britain. Otherwise, removed from their roots, American musical imports such as white jazz, skiffle and rock'n'roll, performed by white men and women, became popular in France and Britain by the late 1950s. In fact, 'white' derivatives of 'black' music were even appropriated, with local offshoots and imitators: Lonnie Donegan, Tommy Steele and Marty Wilde, and later the Rolling Stones and Lulu in Britain; and French jazz-pop artists like Sacha Distel and 'yéyé' singers like Johnny Hallyday and Françoise Hardy.

The popular reception and adaptation of American styles and tastes prompted contemporary discussions of 'Americanisation' as threatening national cultures, although such discussions did not diminish its popularity. 'Americanisation' was welcomed by some as an alternative to national culture, which fused with it over time thanks to local artists and interpreters, liberating people from the tyranny of traditional popular culture by inspiring new, home-made cultural forms. Thus, 'Americanisation' transformed its host cultures and drew them toward massification and democratisation of tastes. This is not to suggest that British and French societies had not been leaning toward cheap,

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<sup>76</sup> Abrams, a market researcher, suggested this of Britain, but it is true *a fortiori* of France; Mark Abrams, *The Teenage Consumer* (London: The London Press Exchange, 1959), 19.

<sup>77</sup> Richard Kuisel suggests this of France, but the point is valid, albeit to a lesser degree, of Britain. Richard F. Kuisel, *Seducing the French: The Dilemma of Americanization* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 235 – henceforth: Kuisel, *Seducing*.

mass-produced and kitsch cultural products before and during the Second World War, but rather that postwar 'Americanisation' accelerated this process and gave it an identifiable image and agency.

#### 'Massification' and cultural democratisation

The distinction between 'Americanisation' and cultural massification is somewhat artificial: in postwar Britain and France the two processes fed into each other. However, cultural massification extended beyond 'Americanisation'. The growth of purchasing power since the early 1950s had resulted in a concomitant rise in spending, an activity that signified to many French and British people the end of wartime shortages and want. As domestic industries recovered and grew, the bulk of industrial manufacture shifted from heavy to light industry, and more (and cheaper) consumer products became available. Even before domestic recovery, British and French markets were flooded with American-manufactured goods, being at least in France part of American reconstruction aid. In this respect 'Americanisation' assisted consumerism indirectly, as a technological facilitator. By 1958 eleven million French homes had radio sets, and by the end of the decade almost a quarter of all homes had both a *frigo* and a washing machine, multiplying threefold over six years. Refrigerators or formica-clad kitchen fittings held a particular *cachet* as bringing the American lifestyle to the French home and freeing housewives from domestic drudgery.<sup>78</sup>

Probably the most representative of commodities of postwar technological, cultural, and socioeconomic transformation were television sets and cars, both available before the war but only booming after it. In Britain from 1947 to 1951 the purchase of television licences multiplied a thousand-fold to 1.5 million; by 1953, 56% of the adult population, some 20.5 million people, tuned into the Coronation proceedings on television, compared with the two million on London's streets on the day; by 1961, three out of four British homes had a television set; and, despite the predictions of BBC director-general William Haley, attention was shifting from wireless to television, attracting audiences and

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<sup>78</sup> Kedward, 375.



performers alike, as in the case of *Hancock's Half-Hour*.<sup>79</sup> The commercial Independent Television Authority was introduced in 1955: with half the population watching by 1960 on any given evening, it quickly drew advertising from newspapers and from cinema, and together with the BBC accounted for a sharp plunge in cinema attendance during the fifties and early sixties.<sup>80</sup> In France, television caught on rather slowly and as late as 1960 only 2 million homes across the country had a set. Here again, the popularisation of television as the 1960s progressed came at the great expense of film, with many cinemas being shut down late in the decade.<sup>81</sup>

Between 1950 and 1965 car ownership in Britain grew nearly fourfold, to over 9.1 million vehicles; they were driven over new infrastructures, like the M1 motorway, the first section of which was opened in 1959; and were considered by planners to be the more flexible alternative to an old and inefficient railways system.<sup>82</sup> In France, too, the rise in purchasing power throughout the 1950s was mainly used to buy cars, which were no longer considered luxury items but were not yet everyday necessities. The broadening of car ownership was a slow but accelerating process: by 1960 one in ten French people owned a car, but by the end of the following year this rose to one in eight.<sup>83</sup> Paris, France's largest metropolis, was particularly transformed to accommodate more vehicles: its inner city was 'cleaned' of poorer dwellings by the redevelopment and resettlement scheme of the new Haussman, Paris prefect Paul Delouvrier (formerly Monnet's aide), who was also responsible for its permeable wall of traffic, the *Périphérique* (constructed 1956-7) and for its fast-growing suburban sprawl.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Marwick, *Society*, 79, 91; Hennessy, 111-112.

<sup>80</sup> Hennessy, 104, 534-535.

<sup>81</sup> John Lough, *Writer and Public in France: From the Middle Ages to the Present Day* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 392.

<sup>82</sup> Christopher Booker, *The Neophiliacs: a Study of the Revolution in English Life in the Fifties and Sixties* (London: Collins, 1969), 39; Marwick, *Society*, 92-93.

<sup>83</sup> Ross, *Fast Cars*, 19, 27-29, 201 n.22; she cites Jean-Pierre Bardou, *La Révolution automobile* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1977).

<sup>84</sup> Ross, *Fast Cars*, 53-54, 153-156; the urban experience was fictionally rendered in a popular novel of the period, Christiane Rochefort's *Les Petits Enfants du siècle* (1961).

Industrial transformation in postwar Britain and France and a greater availability of private transportation, marketed at newly affluent workers and middle classes, created a demand for a new kind of worker. British heavy industries were being eclipsed by lighter production, not least of domestic consumer goods. The challenge of full production during the remainder of the forties forced some modernisation of industrial methods, making highly skilled all-round workmen redundant in a segmented assembly method and leading to the 'de-skilling' of labour.<sup>85</sup> In the short term this was particularly beneficial for younger workers, as industry required a less skilled and more flexible workforce to perform simpler work. Factory work was easy to find in the full employment economy, and as real earnings rose across the economy, for the first time British people were working less for more. In France, the car was portrayed as instrumental to the kind of flexibility that made one a desirable worker: here was *l'homme disponible* (available man), the mobile worker who had broken with the rigid traditionalism of the past and was at the centre of the French vision of the future, of a France 'marrying its epoch', catching up with the times.<sup>86</sup>

This image of new opportunities in technologised massification was not entirely borne out by fact. For many Frenchmen, 'rationalised' industries offered work, but no new avenues for social mobility: 'de-skilled' work had the potential to trap workers at their assembly lines, as managerial ranks were filled by specially trained professional *cadres*. Much frustration was occasioned by the realisation that one could only take part in the new wealth of a future-oriented France by adapting to a specific slot allotted by the social order, that is, by the ruling classes. This condition, that Alain Touraine dubbed 'dependent participation', led to alienation from the social and cultural order.<sup>87</sup> Due to the traditional centrality of the British class system, 'dependent participation' by any

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<sup>85</sup> Bill Osgerby, "'The Young Ones': Youth, Consumption and Representations of the 'Teenager' in Post-War Britain," *Anglistic & Englischunterricht* vol. 63: *Youth Identities: Teens and Twens in British Culture*, ed. by Hans-Jürgen Diller, Erwin Otto and Gerd Stratmann (Heidelberg: Winter, 2000), 10 – henceforth: Osgerby, "Young Ones".

<sup>86</sup> Ross, *Fast Cars*, 22; the image of France 'marrying its epoch' is de Gaulle's, from a speech made on 14 June 1960, quoted in Kedward, 402.

<sup>87</sup> Kedward, 402; he refers to Alain Touraine, *The Post-Industrial Society*, trans. by Leonard F.X. Mayhew (London: Wildwood House, 1974 [1969]).

other name was a common affair. The promise of social mobility through newfound affluence and better education was problematic here because it left status gaps untouched. The paradox of 1950s British affluence was that greater spending power was structurally prevented from giving everyone access to what Fred Hirsch later called 'positional goods': 'room at the top' was by definition limited, and the fact that more people could afford cars or better homes in quieter suburbs did not raise their social status.<sup>88</sup> The British class system was one obstacle, but the problem was that goal posts moved as affluence spread: positional goods can only be enjoyed in scarcity, and so the wider availability of cars, for example, made them too common to distinguish their owners as being ahead of the Joneses.

Increased free time and spending power made the family household the location of more of people's leisure. Affordable radio and television sets offered workers rest and recreation at the end of the working day in the comfort of their own home, without needing to go out to pubs, cafés, social clubs or movie theatres. Yet on both sides of the Channel people were not just staying in more, they were also getting away. In France, a fourth week of annual paid holiday was introduced in December 1962, spearheaded by the nationalised Renault factories. *Le weekend* became an indicative leisure phenomenon and a microcosm of the extended annual summer *vacances*, both marked as 'real' leisure by the departure from the big cities *out* to the countryside in the family car.<sup>89</sup> The British were also increasingly getting away: domestic tourism boomed at English holiday camps (taken over by the working classes) and seaside resorts like Blackpool or Scarborough.<sup>90</sup> Numbers of people taking foreign holidays also increased, doubling from 1950 to 3.5 million in 1961, helped by a relaxation of travel money restrictions, allowing more than "Five! Five pounds in notes!" as a public information announcement had instructed.<sup>91</sup> As staying in and getting away

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<sup>88</sup> Hennessy, 518-519; he relies on Fred Hirsch, *Social Limits to Growth* (London: Routledge, 1977 [1976]).

<sup>89</sup> Kedward, 404.

<sup>90</sup> Marwick, *Society*, 49-50.

<sup>91</sup> In 1954 the limit (unrealistic to most travellers) was raised to £100. Hennessy, 11-12, 539; relying on Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain: Rationing, Controls and Consumption, 1939-1955* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 2, 33-37, 83. Graham

became easier, they had a necessary effect on public spheres: the development of private leisure pursuits and greater satisfaction with them and with a generally growing affluence understandably decreased the potentiality of social confrontation and contributed to political quietism.

Concerned for the growing leisure time of their publics, French and British governments saw fit to steer their publics toward more valuable and enriching pursuits. Shortly after the founding of the Fifth Republic, de Gaulle appointed author and activist André Malraux to head a newly created Ministry for Cultural Affairs, which for some time administered highbrow culture through its network of *maisons de culture*. In Britain, BBC founding director-general Lord Reith's maxim for public broadcasting to 'educate, inform and entertain' was upheld, not least through the BBC's short-lived highbrow Third Programme. A similar approach was adopted in public funding by the Arts Council, until the mid-1960s a patrician sponsor on behalf of the state of alternatives to the pub and music hall.<sup>92</sup> These regulatory tendencies had several aspects: they were clearly the product of paternalistic and centralised approaches to popular culture, but they can also be seen to match Fordist management techniques in the belief that a better use of leisure time contributes to better work (and by extension political) performance. A third aspect regards purpose: at least in its initial stages, postwar reconstruction was taken to be a national project that required collective effort, and mass cultural conditioning was perceived as part of building a better society.

### Rise of 'youth culture'

The prized asset of national reconstruction projects was national youth, invested with national expectations, hopes and fears of the future. In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War rising birth rates were recorded. The British 'baby boom' was the product not just of contingent factors like the return of husbands to their wives, but was also the result of a public government-sponsored drive to boost procreation toward the end of the war – with similar encouragements from de Gaulle to the French in the last stages of the war. Much

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Greene offered an amusing take on the £5 limit and ways of bypassing it in his *Travels with My Aunt* (1969).

<sup>92</sup> Geoff Mulgan, "Culture: the Problem with Being Public," *The Ideas that Shaped Post-War Britain*, ed. David Marquand and Anthony Seldon (London: Fontana Press, 1996), 197.

discussed in the years after the war, the ‘baby boom’ created anticipations of an early 1960s demographic ‘bulge’, as it was known in Britain, around the time adolescents were meant to leave school and vocational training and join the workforce and adult society. The French ‘baby boom’ peaked around 1947-49 and not only expanded society but also made it younger, with one person in three being under twenty in 1967.<sup>93</sup> By comparison, the British ‘baby boom’ was only relative (21 births per thousand), the bucking of a trend of falling birth rates plaguing Britain since the late nineteenth century.<sup>94</sup> The qualitative difference of ‘baby boomers’ from their elders was more noticeable than the quantitative one: with rising standards of living, children enjoyed a better quality of life. Infant mortality rates were the lowest on record, and the postwar generation was growing up to be visibly different: taller, heavier, hitting puberty sooner and getting a better education.

The family was still the prominent social institution in postwar British society, holding its ground through the 1940s, the 1950s and the 1960s; yet while marriage rates remained the same, marriages seemed to become increasingly fragile, as divorce rates rose steadily throughout the fifties and more sharply during the sixties.<sup>95</sup> Yet while this basic relation between men and women remained fairly constant, the relations between parents and children could be seen to be changing: already in 1951, suggests Marwick, “there was little belief in the innocence or innate goodness of children,” and it was widely thought that “children need more discipline.”<sup>96</sup> In the early 1950s a relaxation of morality among the young was recorded, a ‘moral decline’ also cited for the growth of public interest in sex; in fact, the young were more sexually active – partly because of earlier physical maturation – but not sexually promiscuous.<sup>97</sup> “Never

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<sup>93</sup> Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (London: Pimlico, 2007), 331.

<sup>94</sup> Sandbrook, 413.

<sup>95</sup> Marwick, *Society*, 136.

<sup>96</sup> Marwick, *Society*, 47; relying on the 1951 survey in: Geoffrey Gorer, *Exploring English Character* (London: Cressett Press, 1955).

<sup>97</sup> Booker, 42; Arthur Marwick, *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy, and the United States, c.1958-c.1974* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 75-76 – henceforth: Marwick, *Sixties*; see also Michael Schofield, *The Sexual Behaviour of Young People* (London: Longmans, 1965).

before had the young been so prominent,” claimed one observer, and feelings were mixed as to whether or not this was a good thing.<sup>98</sup>

France shared the initial still-traditional social structure that prevailed in Britain. Until the mid-1950s the Catholic Church and its traditions were still influential; boys and girls were segregated in schools, and family and home were where most youngsters spent most of their leisure, under watchful parental eyes.<sup>99</sup> Nevertheless the emerging French postwar youth experience was different from that of earlier generations, and its generational gap seemingly wider than its British parallel. The shame of the Occupation and Collaboration considerably weakened the moral authority of postwar parents and other adults. The Gaullist myth (‘everyone resisted’) functioned here to reassert the authority of older generations and of tradition, which affirmed their superiority. Yet postwar French youths were unabashedly reluctant to follow in their parents’ footsteps, and were convinced of the viability of such a break with old ways.

Some elements enabling greater self-determination among postwar youths were mentioned above: employment was relatively easy to come by thanks to a demand for flexible and relatively unskilled labour; educational horizons widened considerably in the postwar period. Here France was ahead of Britain: the *école républicaine* had already been providing free and secular education to all under-15’s since the 1880s, but managed to increase *bachelier* numbers five-fold between 1950 and 1970; and the Lansonist higher education system was expanded, particularly under the Fifth Republic.<sup>100</sup> In Britain, a series of governmental provisions slowly transformed education: the Butler Education Act of 1944 ensured universal minimal levels of education, further enhanced in 1947 by raising school leaving age to 15; further vocational opportunities were introduced with compulsory National Service in 1948; higher education was expanded following the Robbins Report of 1963, to include ‘new’ universities, polytechnics and art schools; and the Newsom Report of the same year sought to

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<sup>98</sup> Booker, 132.

<sup>99</sup> Marwick, *Sixties*, 95.

<sup>100</sup> Judt, 391.

enhance vocational and technical training, if only to turn youths towards modernised, high-tech industries.<sup>101</sup>

On the cusp of work and study, the business and administration schools turned out professionalised managers for the executive class. The French Ecole Nationale de l'Administration (ENA) was not just a *grande école*, a managerial finishing school and a tool for the social control of the managerial class. It was also intended as the fresh face of a postwar France, 'modernised' but also not associated with the war, as it replaced a network of similar Vichy institutions.<sup>102</sup> ENA was by design and function the training academy for technocrats, with *énarques* turning into captains of industry and state. Its general approach was a Keynesian revision of liberalism, and its teaching was similarly revisionist: for the first time in France, it stressed economics in its curriculum, made it more mathematical, and taught it through case studies.<sup>103</sup> For comparison, such an important structural innovation was typically delayed in Britain, which waited until the 1960s for its first business school.<sup>104</sup>

In the late 1950s, two things about French and British youths became clear: they had distinct subcultures with their own values, norms and symbols; and even before they became participants in civic life, they were already part of its economy, distinguished by their different consumption patterns. Young people in postwar Britain and France started work early in life and, initially still living at home, had more money than ever before for 'discretionary spending', usually on clothes in young styles and on new music – both heavily influenced by American youth fashions or their local interpretations. Young tastes, clearly distinct from adult ones, soon attracted accusations of hedonistic materialism, as well as exploitation by merchants and a 'youth industry' that sought to tap into a clearly defined niche market. Broadcast entertainment followed suit, first in

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<sup>101</sup> Marwick, *Society*, 37; Davis, 98-101, 107-109.

<sup>102</sup> The Ecoles des Cadres, a network of over fifty institutions based in Saint-Martin-d'Uriage, was established in 1940 to train future elites for Pétain's 'national revolution'. The Uriage school's short existence established an important precedent and trained subsequently influential figures like the public educator Benigno Cacérès and the founding editor of *Le Monde*, Hubert Beuve-Méry.

<sup>103</sup> Kuisel, *Capitalism*, 215.

<sup>104</sup> Hennessy, 53.

Britain and then in France, with radio and then television programmes, with public broadcasting trailing behind the much more savvy commercial stations.<sup>105</sup> The adult search for 'young style' reflected a basic misunderstanding of youth culture, being not one but several distinct strains of interests and vogues, some following, for example, jazz and swing aesthetics, others following the emergent rock'n'roll (or *yéyé*) styles. This plurality is unsurprising considering the unprecedented scale of cultural stimuli available after the war: old media, like radio and cinema, expanded significantly; newer media were introduced to popular use, like television and the 45/33rpm records (soon replacing sheet music as the musical commodity); and American expeditionary forces, still deployed across Western Europe, consumed and spread their own directly imported popular culture.

The rejection of authority implied in the young's insistence on their own subcultures was bound to draw opprobrium. Apart from their 'shallow materialism', French youths were also accused of political 'abstentionism' and lack of social conscience. Some observers were careful not to wholly condemn the young, balancing their problematic image with suggestions (not wide of the mark) that the young were concerned about social affairs but felt themselves powerless to influence them. A similar duality was apparent in the British discourse on youth, exalting them as the subject of the national 'vitality fantasy' but also generating a moral panic about their ungrateful supposed 'delinquency in affluence'. The charge of political 'abstentionism' was exaggerated, as young people were widely involved in political activism, be it in France, through the national student union (UNEF) and protesting against police brutality and the Algerian War; or in Britain, attempting to exert outside pressure on party politics through the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND). Young people were generally misunderstood and misrepresented by their elders, not least because they were viewed through the fantasies (and anxieties) of their elders about a new national order. In fact, the only change heralded by 'affluent' British and French postwar youths was the expansion of their respective national middle classes.

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<sup>105</sup> Marwick, *Sixties*, 101-108; Osgerby, "Young Ones," 13.



The above sections have explained the concept of cultural pessimism and its relevance to the discussion in this thesis. A short historical exposition of postwar Britain and France then demonstrated the commonalities and similarities between the two national experiences as a foundation for their comparison in the following sections. The remainder of this introduction will include a short survey of the scholarly literature on the topics of this thesis, followed by an explanation of its methodology and structure.

## ***Literature survey***

### **Cultural pessimism**

Cultural pessimism is a composite discourse that is still under construction, informed by several existing discourses on some of its constituent concepts and tropes. The body of scholarship regarding cultural pessimism *per se* is thus quite small for such a stock topic in modern Western experience. Two relevant discourses are of only limited import here: philosophical scholarship on pessimism (Schopenhauer and Nietzsche being its foremost proponents) restricts itself to the history of continental philosophy; and pessimism in psychology is regarded as a wholly individual attitude or mental disposition, excluding cultural pessimism. Most studies relevant to cultural pessimism are one-offs: each constructs the picture of a discourse to which it seeks to contribute, and there is also little agreement on the terminology and taxonomy of cultural pessimism. The topic lacks an exhaustive, definitive study of the breadth and historical depth of cultural pessimism, a touchstone for subsequent contributions. Two notably broad studies of pessimism as an aspect of collective consciousness are Joe Bailey's general exploration *Pessimism* and Oliver Bennett's *Cultural Pessimism*.<sup>106</sup>

Several studies are useful starting points into cultural pessimism, for what they lack as much as for what they contain. Arthur Herman's *The Idea of Decline in Western History* proposes an understanding of historical process by charting

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<sup>106</sup> Some works in this literature survey were already encountered in the preceding exposition and are revisited. Full citations of items discussed below are in the bibliography to this study.

major works of pessimist thought of the past two centuries (mainly the nineteenth century) in their historical contexts. Herman tends to over-represent American thinkers, presenting DuBois and the Adams brothers as on a par with more influential thinkers like Spengler and Toynbee. A typical problem in Herman is his attempt to 'reclaim' pessimism for conservatism, dedicating the entire third section of his book to the condemnation of left-wing theoreticians (Marcuse and the Frankfurt School, Sartre, Foucault). Raymond Tallis' lengthy polemic, *Enemies of Hope: A Critique of Contemporary Pessimism* is a similar British case.

More balanced, scholarly accounts tend to offer more critical insight, even when their scope is more restricted. Patrick Brantlinger's *Bread and Circuses: Theories of Mass Culture as Social Decay* goes back beyond the Renaissance to the ancient ideational roots of some modern pessimist concepts; in that it is akin to Frank Kermode's similarly insightful *The Sense of an Ending*. Brantlinger treats the historical process of the massification of culture lucidly, suggesting that aspect of cultural pessimism as fundamental to the understanding of other core concepts like degeneration and decadence.

Another useful starting point is Chamberlin and Gilman's volume *Degeneration: the Dark Side of Progress*, demonstrating the pervasive influence of 'degeneration' in scholarly and creative fields. While useful, this book is potentially misleading, and in a way typical of studies of degeneration and decadence. The two terms are discussed in the context of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, where the elision between the two terms is understandable – as noted above, a confusing slippage to the uninformed reader. The limited applicability of discourses on decadence and degeneration illuminates the necessary caution for deriving insights from them to a more general consideration of cultural pessimism.

Therefore, the prominent scholarship both on decadence and the Decadents and on degeneration is used in this thesis mainly as background, helping shape an understanding of tropes of cultural pessimism. Regarding degeneration, the main works consulted include Hayden White's essay on "The Forms of Wildness," Robert S. Nye's *Crime, Madness and Politics in Modern France*, Daniel Pick's *Faces of Degeneration*, the first section of Sabine Maassen and Peter Weingart's *Metaphors and the Dynamics of Knowledge* on Darwin's

concept of 'struggle for existence', William Greenslade's *Degeneration, Culture and the Novel 1880-1940*, and Edward Caudill's *Darwinian Myths*. On decadence the list is much longer, starting with Norberto Bobbio's *The Philosophy of Decadentism* and Cyril Joad's *Decadence*, through Frank Kermode's seminal *The Sense of an Ending*, Jerome Hamilton Buckley's *The Triumph of Time*, and Matei Calinescu's discussion in the revised *Five Faces of Modernity*, to the most recent and inventive works: Richard Gilman's *Decadence: The Strange Life of an Epithet*, Thomas Reid Whissen's *Devil's Advocates*, and Charles Bernheimer's posthumous *Decadent Subjects*.

The relatively small body of scholarship specifically on cultural pessimism forces one to tap unorthodox sources for useful points. While barely apparent in the body of this work, these sources deserve some mention. Robert Wohl's *The Generation of 1914* provided an example of 'generational' collective pictures. Maasen and Weingart's study elucidated processes of (mis)understanding of metaphors as influential to knowledge transfer. Terry Eagleton's *Ideology of the Aesthetic* explained romantic and post-romantic ideological imagery. Krishan Kumar's *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times* enhanced this study's understanding of the link between utopias and cultural pessimism. Connections between pessimism and theories of history were suggested in Ilan Gur-Ze'ev's introduction to *The Frankfurt School and the History of Pessimism*, Mircea Eliade's *The Myth of Eternal Return*, Fritz Stern's *The Politics of Cultural Despair*, and parts of Gardiner's survey in *Theories of History*. Conceptual relations between decline and progress were enriched by Robert Nisbet's *The History of the Idea of Progress* and Christopher Lasch's *The True and Only Heaven*, and James Thomson's *Decline in History* puts the self-referentiality of European narratives of decline in perspective.

### **Postwar Britain**

Britain enjoys a conspicuous abundance of summaries, surveys and assessments of its postwar literature and culture. The war period and its immediate aftermath merit this attention as social, economic and cultural watersheds. The majority of these studies tend to be oriented toward the mainstream, even when they indulge themselves in some less-known or less-remembered texts of the postwar period.

Thus, they maintain a canonical approach alongside an attempt to be exhaustive through inclusiveness.

Some of these surveys are overtly partisan, at times contentious, either in the choice of works covered or in the way they are treated, and this sometimes works to their benefit. Among these are Alan Sinfield's *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain*, Bryan Appleyard's medley *The Pleasures of Peace*, Robert Hewison's *In Anger*, Andrzej Gasiorek's *Postwar British Fiction: Realism and After*, and Bernard Bergonzi's equally stern *English Literature and Its Background* and *The Situation of the Novel*. These studies tend to view literature as somehow representative of its general contemporary cultural and social setting – an interpretive attitude acknowledged by some as distinctive of the postwar period and its own reception of fiction.

This tendency is less common among the more straightforward literary histories, which tend to adhere to conventional judgments of cultural and literary (or literary-historical) merit. These include Dominic Head's *Cambridge Companion to Modern British Fiction 1950-2000*, D.J. Taylor's *After the War: the Novel and English Society Since 1945*, Stephen Connor's *The English Novel in History 1950-1995*, Philip Tew's *The Contemporary British Novel*, or John Brannigan's relatively recent *Orwell to the Present: Literature in England 1945-2000*, which also takes many earlier accounts into consideration. These literary accounts were complemented by accounts of the postwar period from a social history perspective, which included Arthur Marwick's *British Culture since 1945* and *British Society since 1945*, Peter Hennessy's *Having It So Good: Britain in the Fifties* (and its antecedent, *Never Again: Britain 1945-1951*), and Dominic Sandbrook's *Never Had It So Good*.

### **Postwar France**

Unlike their British counterparts, postwar French cultural studies produced in France are disinclined to take the dynamics of literature as indicative, by metonymy or otherwise, of general French society and its culture. Instead, literature is surveyed broadly, including accounts of French publishing, literary prizes and their scandals, and critical discourse in the various reviews and periodicals. Foreign accounts allow themselves an altogether broader remit. Notable among French cultural studies in English is the great volume of output

from *Yale French Studies*, which as a policy has always represented French literature *and* culture. The YFS group generates some significant works in English, like Nancy Wood's *Vectors of Memory* and Kristin Ross's *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies*.

Seeing the literary and the social as two discrete realms, French postwar literary overviews also tend toward a more discriminating and strictly canonical approach than British accounts. The resultant picture tends to be retrospectively constructed and biased toward experimental and avant-garde works and 'great writers', at the expense of more popular works which probably enjoyed a wider readership at the time. There seems to be a striking agreement on 'great works' and how they should be classified: this runs, for example, through Maurice Nadeau's *Le Roman français depuis la guerre* and Gaëtan Picon's *Panorama de la nouvelle littérature française* in the 1960s, Germaine Brée's *Twentieth-Century French Literature* in the late 1970s, and a recent work like Eliane Tonnet-Lacroix's *La Littérature française et francophone de 1945 à l'an 2000*. There is a similar agreement on groupings and classifications (*Hussards*, *nouveaux romanciers*, existentialists), taking authors' political stances into account in a way that is deemed legitimate considering the formative influence of French politics (and political ideologies) on French culture.

Some works have been particularly instrumental in this study's contextualisation of French cultural affairs, in particular with regard to politics. The most general overviews include Rod Kedward's *La Vie en bleu* and Anne Simonin and Hélène Castres's chronology *Les Idées en France 1945-1988*, as well as Jean-Pierre Rioux and Jean-François Sirinelli's *Le Temps des masses: le vingtième siècle* and Jean Fourastié, *Les Trente Glorieuses ou la Révolution invisible de 1946 à 1975*. Political histories consulted include Jean-Pierre Rioux's, *The Fourth Republic 1944-1958*, Pierre Cabanne's *Le Pouvoir culturel sous la Ve République*, and Richard Kuisel's *Capitalism and the State in Modern France*. Some particularly useful sources on specific topics were Henri Rousso's *The Vichy Syndrome* and Robert O. Paxton's *Vichy France*; Brian Rigby's *Popular Culture in Modern France: A Study of Cultural Discourse*, Pascal Ory's *L'Aventure culturelle française 1945-1989*, and Richard Kuisel's *Seducing the French*; Tony Judt's *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals 1944-1956*, Michael Kelly's *The Cultural and Intellectual Rebuilding of France after the Second*

*World War*, and Ory and Sirinelli's *Les Intellectuels en France de l'affaire Dreyfus à nos jours*.

### **British-French cultural comparisons**

As noted, there are relatively few comparative cultural studies of contemporary Britain and France. This could be due to the traditional disciplinary nature of academic research, or to a reluctance to compare these two national cultures for the lack of immediate similarities supporting such a comparison. The last decade has seen a change on both counts. The legitimacy of interdisciplinary studies in the humanities has been growing, as has the volume of scholarship, be it through (inter)cultural studies, European studies, or comparative literature, aided by new dedicated research degree programmes and journals like *Franco-British Studies*. As for the foundation for cross-cultural comparison, it cannot be taken for granted and needs to be argued on a case- and context-specific basis, and this is itself aided by the growing body of comparative work.

This thesis has benefited from several useful comparative studies. A short but important contribution comes from one British champion of such a perspective, Michael Kelly, in his article on "Comparing French and British Intellectuals: Towards a Cross-Channel Perspective." Discussing British and French intellectuals, one cannot ignore the work of Stefan Collini, in his *English Pasts* (discussing the *Lieux de mémoire* project) and more extensively in his recent *Absent Minds*. In one of his last books, *The Sixties*, Arthur Marwick offered a comparative cultural study of the makings of the Sixties *Zeitgeist*, illuminating the rise of youth culture. Another ambitious project is that of Robert and Isabelle Tombs, accounting for mutual British and French perceptions in their *That Sweet Enemy: the French and the British from the Sun King to the Present*. A broader panorama of contemporary Europe is Tony Judt's *Postwar*, a massive tome that helps put national processes in perspective.

## ***Methodology and structure***

### **Methodological considerations**

This thesis proceeds from the set of ideas, concepts and attitudes that is cultural pessimism. It studies tropes of cultural pessimism in two contemporary cultures, examining the ways in which it is manifested, and how these manifestations are interlinked. Several methodological choices frame this research, regarding its understanding of ‘culture’, its designated objects of study, its choice among these objects, and the ways in which they are researched and interpreted.

‘Culture’ in this thesis will be used in its inclusive, anthropological sense, as the sum of the symbols, values and customs – that is, ideational rather than structural elements – of a human grouping, most commonly a society. The totality and inclusiveness of the term is conveyed when viewed, as Bennett proposes (following Raymond Williams), as a way of life. Culture is collectively constructed: it is always in flux, and what it means and includes is dynamic and ever-emergent.<sup>107</sup> It has no essence, but rather a history, to explain the way it is. This chosen definition of ‘culture’ bears on this thesis in several ways. Firstly, it decides against strictly canonical views of culture that limit it to ‘high culture’: instead it will try to reflect various ‘popular’ cultural phenomena as well, and to discuss literary works irrespective of received notions of literary-historical merit. Secondly, this thesis will look to the social and cultural history of Britain and France in order to contextualise and account for the literary works highlighted.

For its limited length, this thesis cannot have the scope of an exhaustive overview of postwar cultural pessimism and must remain a selective interpretation, proposing trajectories and recording contours and milestones. The ‘consequential’ texts and cultural phenomena selected here are those which have proven from our contemporary vantage point to be turning points in the history

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<sup>107</sup> According to anthropologist Ulf Hannerz, “To study culture is to study ideas, experiences, feelings, as well as the external forms that such internalities take as they are made public, available to the senses and thus truly social. For culture, in the anthropological view, is the meanings which people create, and which create people, as members of societies. Culture is in some way collective.” Ulf Hannerz, *Cultural Complexity: Studies in the Social Organization of Meaning* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 3.

of their medium or genre; exemplary models that have inspired emulations or critical reactions; and texts and cultural phenomena that are representative of a popular or specific *Zeitgeist*. These three main interpretations of the consequential – the influential, the pivotal, and the representative – share a common bias: they are not aesthetic qualities, which supervene on taste or canon, but rather historical categories (including here the art-historical and literary-historical).

The texts chosen for discussion serve a variety of purposes in this study. Texts can illuminate the contexts of their production and reception: Sillitoe's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, for example, is representative of the changing writing and reading (and film viewing) trends in Britain of the late 1950s. Texts can illuminate each other by force of juxtaposition: considered together as contemporaneous attitudes to social structure, Sillitoe's debut novel and Genet's play *Le Balcon*, otherwise disparate, show thematic affinities in their respective treatments of marginality, the fixity of social order, and the resultant sense of entrapment. Texts can also illuminate the cultural comparison itself: Wilson and Duras and their divergent treatments of national identity and collective memory highlight two different tendencies of British and French national imaginaries. Ultimately, the chosen works were selected for their textual richness and the wealth of topics and devices they allow me to discuss: the popularity of Françoise Sagan's *Bonjour tristesse* (1954) does not compensate for its shallow, skeletal narrative, and so it remains in the background of a discussion focussing on Vian's *L'Ecume des jours*.

The readings offered of the literary texts are meant to propose a consistent thematic interpretation, assisted by secondary literature and suggesting a narrative of cultural pessimism in the particular juncture studied.<sup>108</sup> This series of readings will also allow the present thesis to do something different: to explore cultural pessimism from within, through its tropes. Cultural pessimism will form the horizon and the vanishing point of the perspectives I bring to bear in this thesis: using it as a conceptual system will enable an unconventional

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<sup>108</sup> On thematic interpretation in literature see: Menachem Brinker, "Theme and Interpretation" [in Hebrew], in his *About Literature: Essays on the Borderline of Philosophy of Art and Literary Theory* (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2000), 220-231.



examination of the literary texts and their cultural contexts; and, in turn, by instantiating cultural pessimism, the texts and contexts discussed will illuminate it as an overarching narrative in the postwar period.

## **Thesis structure**

This thesis will examine the tropes of cultural pessimism as they appear in literary texts and cultural contexts of Britain and France roughly during the two decades after the Second World War. The thesis will suggest the prominence of cultural pessimism in these settings, and will seek to understand the particular forms it took during this period of transformation and their relative novelty. The following thematic sections are laid out as juxtapositions, presenting Britain and France separately and in their respective terms. These juxtapositions are complemented by comparative section summaries, which isolate the tropes of cultural pessimism discussed in the chapters and consider their similarities and divergences.

Section 1 will survey tropes of postwar cultural pessimism with regard to social structure, and discuss their literary manifestation in Alan Sillitoe's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1958) and Jean Genet's *Le Balcon* (1956). This section also shows the two nations, and cultural critics within them, grappling with received and problematic notions of culture (as 'high' culture), and with their redefinition as more inclusive of hitherto unrepresented ways of life. Within the general anxiety at the time for the transformation of social orders by welfare systems and new affluence, these two works also help illustrate the sense of entrapment on the margins of those old orders which, for all their transformation, seemed to persist.

Section 2 will discuss culturally pessimistic attitudes toward national identity and collective memory, elaborating on Angus Wilson's *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes* (1956) and on Marguerite Duras's screenplay (and Alain Resnais's film) *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959). The combative approaches to national traditions and memory reflected the sensitivity of the issue of national identity, 'rediscovered' as already endangered and in need of defence by its vanguard. Yet beside these preoccupations, some of which had already had their precedents in the interwar period, wartime and postwar experiences also added a new sense of

semiotic crisis, a crisis of representation, which informed attitudes of cultural pessimism.

Section 3 will continue the discussion of several tropes and approaches discussed in the preceding sections, carrying them on to an examination of postwar figurations of youth in a rapidly modernising age. The two texts chosen will frame this period and will thus be presented chronologically, beginning with Boris Vian's *L'Ecume des jours* (1947), and concluding with Colin MacInnes's *Absolute Beginners* (1959). These works, and the rise of youth culture on the crest of the wave of affluence and modernisation, will serve to illustrate two seemingly conflicting views of postwar youths: as similar to their elders, yet disappointing them in their lax ways; or as completely different to their elders, presenting an inscrutable new social force that was perceived as threatening to established order.

These three themes present some of the contribution of cultural pessimism to understanding postwar Britain and France. They also demonstrate the flexible applicability of cultural pessimism as an interpretive tool in literary, cultural and historical studies. However, most immediately they show the ubiquity of images and tropes of cultural pessimism and their continued relevance to the postwar period as to our time. The idea of decline and reactions to it remain important keys to understanding the way we were but also the way we are still, through our accommodation of the idea and possibility of finitude.

## **Section 1: Cultural Pessimism and Social Structure**

### ***Chapter 1: Cultural Pessimism and Class in Britain***

The issue of social structure in postwar Britain is inextricably linked with the traditional centrality of class to British identities. The story of British postwar reconstruction is also the story of the growth of the working class: its expansion through full employment policies, organisation through the widening of trade-unionism, and rise to relative welfare and affluence (dubbed *embourgeoisement*), widely thought to blur distinctions between it and a middle class impoverished by the war. From the early 1950s, members of the working classes enjoyed opportunities that had not previously been available to their elders. Yet, in the hands of the interwar middle classes, cultural production was slow to catch up with Britain's social transformation. Only around 1956 did literary fiction, theatre and film begin to reflect the new predominance of the affluent working classes as cultural consumers. It was around then that their growing influence as cultural producers also became apparent in literature (working-class fiction), drama ('kitchen sink' theatre) and film (British New Wave cinema), to mixed responses.

This chapter will interpret several responses to these social changes. The postwar cultural scene will be surveyed, concentrating on the public emergence for the first time of new working-class and regional voices, some of which were associated with the label of Angry Young Men. An interesting cross-Channel influence that fed into this belated cultural shift was the translation of fashionable French existentialist fiction and thought, introducing concepts like 'commitment' and 'the absurd' to English readership. Technological and legislative changes also aided this diversification of culture, with affordable paperbacks now offering more popular literature, government investment in libraries and gradual relaxation of controls on theatre and film productions.

Reactions to social and cultural changes did not follow class definitions. The erosion of the old middle class (discussed below in chapter 3) notwithstanding, the working classes were not always pleased at the opportunities of affluence. Many saw in these opportunities false choices, leading

to false lives betraying their spiritual grounding in traditional working-class roots. These opinions found their way into academic critical discourse, owing in part to the culturalist redefinition of English studies espoused by F.R. Leavis, and in part to the newly formed discipline of Cultural Studies, corresponding to similar political changes in the formation of the British New Left. The New Left exasperation with party politics has affinities with frustrations concerning the production and study of British culture, forming a tangle of anxieties about the new postwar social reality. These anxieties found some outlet in Alan Sillitoe's debut novel, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1958), which will be discussed at the conclusion of this chapter.

### **The British Postwar Cultural Scene**

The changes outlined above began during the war years and manifested themselves, at least politically, shortly afterwards. The collective experience of the war effort shaped among working-class men an egalitarian understanding of social relations: their lengthy and intimate intermingling with middle- and upper-class men for the common goal of King and Country eroded a sense of deference. Back home, most women, burdened during the war by the double load of homemaking and industrial work, looked forward to material improvements (education, housing) on interwar conditions, hoping for jobs that would allow their husbands to be sole breadwinners.<sup>109</sup> For these reasons, the Labour electoral victory of 1945 was unsurprising: people expected change, and the Labour programme promised just that.

The surprise in Attlee's election was in the widespread politicisation it reflected, which had its roots in wartime discussions of war's outcome and the promise of what would follow. The USSR was particularly admired for its military might, industrial prowess and perceived model of social justice, trumpeted in Britain since the 1930s through the Communist Party and organisations like the Left Book Club. The United States, at least through the extensive deployment of American troops in Britain, antagonised the British public, creating tensions around issues of racial segregation and male

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<sup>109</sup> Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000 [1998]), 521, 531.

competition over British women. The working classes, previously loyal to the ‘natural party of government’, the Conservatives, were now willing to question leaders and mobilise politically, mostly toward the left.<sup>110</sup>

This political change also reflected the erosion of the interwar social order. The disintegrating, impoverished interwar middle class was antagonised by working-class affluence: their prevalent 1930s progressive individualism soured into a criticism of the postwar social-democratic vision. However, “outside the realms of social services or nationalized industries the visitor would not have observed a social democracy.”<sup>111</sup> The ideal of social order changed, but many established ideological formations of British society remained in place until the mid-1950s, as the working classes, the great beneficiaries of the welfare state, indulged in the commercialised cultural fruits of capitalism. *Embourgeoisement* had its own popular mythology (similar to those of French modernisation, as will be shown below), and idealised new social types: the practical and hard-working ‘bourgeois worker,’ attached to the homestead governed by his partner, ‘the housewife,’ a woman liberated by consumer goods bought on instalment plans on Saturday shopping trips with her husband; and their offspring, the ‘teenager,’ a misunderstood but privileged creature who held great promise for the future.<sup>112</sup> This vision, mixing reality and fantasy, was predominantly conservative: modernity and the fruits of ‘affluence’ were at home, with the traditional nuclear family, which now, while still nominally working-class, could afford hitherto middle-class tastes. Wartime working-class radicalism dissipated in postwar affluence, as the myth of affluent Britain concealed for some time the social cost of transformation.

Along with slow derationing, following the 1951 Festival of Britain, and against the recent background of Sir Roger Bannister’s four-minute mile, the regaining of the Ashes, Sir Edmund Hilary’s ascent of Everest, and the advent of the ‘new Elizabethan age’ with the summer 1953 coronation – a reinvigoration of national prowess, relying heavily on tradition and familiarity, emerged by the mid-1950s. A sense of back-to-basics renewal was also apparent in the literature

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<sup>110</sup> McKibbin, 524-525, 531-532.

<sup>111</sup> McKibbin, 536, see also 533-534.

<sup>112</sup> Bill Osgerby, *Youth in Britain since 1945* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 31-32 (henceforth: Osgerby, *Youth*).

of the period, particularly in what was dubbed the Movement: the embrace of sober, rational, apolitical British realist writing was marked in the first novels of Iris Murdoch (*Under the Net*), John Wain (*Hurry On Down*) and Kingsley Amis (*Lucky Jim*), published in 1954.<sup>113</sup> The Movement's rejection of both poetic romanticism and experimental modernism made room again for epistemic certainties, conventional narrative construction, a referential adequacy of language, and the assumption of a common, shared experience. All this could also be mocked, as in Amis's comedy of conventions.<sup>114</sup>

The watershed year, if not the *annus mirabilis*, of British postwar literature is widely considered to be 1956. Several political and cultural events frame this. In May a new West End theatre opened in defiance of Theatreland's governing cartel. One of the first productions of George Devine's Royal Court Theatre was the unknown John Osborne's incendiary play *Look Back in Anger*. Subverting the genteel (Osborne even placed an ironing board on stage), the play addressed social continuities and changes in contemporary England through the troubled new marriage of upper-class Alison to working-class Jimmy Porter, a frustrated man with a considerable *Weltschmerz*. Through extensive trumpeting by the critic Kenneth Tynan and a scandalised journalistic reception, the play became a hit. While remaining characteristically middle-class (and generally traditional in style), the frankness of Osborne's play nevertheless managed to attract younger audiences, who usually sought their entertainment in cinemas and dance halls.<sup>115</sup> Three weeks later came Colin Wilson's book of essays, *The Outsider*, also tackling new themes frankly and passionately. Soon journalists were speaking of Angry Young Men.<sup>116</sup>

Politically, from the Suez crisis of late October 1956, it became gradually clear that Britain had reached the end of Empire and was becoming a second-

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<sup>113</sup> George Watson, *British Literature since 1945* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), 67-70. Watson suggests that despite the misrepresentative label, Movement writers still shared a commitment to the 'programme' of new realism.

<sup>114</sup> Watson, 78-79, 92-93.

<sup>115</sup> Robert Hewison, *In Anger: Culture and the Cold War 1945-60* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1981), 145-146, 155.

<sup>116</sup> For more on Wilson's *The Outsider*, see below in this section.

class world power.<sup>117</sup> As the aggressor in Suez, Britain could not protest at the Soviet suppression of the Hungarian uprising shortly afterwards. Both events exacerbated for the British leftist intelligentsia various dissatisfactions about the Establishment, the class system, and the promised alternative. Effectively, “if imperialism had been mortally wounded at Suez, so had Communism at Budapest.”<sup>118</sup> In literature, Movement writers such as Wain and Amis had already expressed some of this unease, but it was the Angry Young Men who gave that dissatisfaction both direction and focus. Anger seemed to intensify from Amis’s *Lucky Jim* to Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger* (1956), through John Braine’s *Room at the Top* (1957), to Alan Sillitoe’s *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1958), which a Daily Telegraph reviewer famously thought made “*Room at the Top* look like a vicarage tea-party.”<sup>119</sup>

This crescendo of frankness, aggression or scandal suggests that discontent and disillusionment were finding their outlet in an increasingly working-class literature. Politically, working-class dissent at the time was only legitimate where cultural (effectively class) distinctions were institutionalised by power structures: in government, education or industry. Otherwise, resentment was depoliticised by its removal from the public sphere and confinement to the personal or the private sphere.<sup>120</sup> Working-class material advancement notwithstanding, this was what young men were really Angry about: they were unwilling to acquiesce with the class system or to keep quiet about their feelings. These “literary Teddy Boys,” who were “the first generation of ‘Butler [education act] kids’... were in their mid-twenties. They had missed the war... [and were] ungratefully slashing the philanthropic hands that had helped them up in the world.”<sup>121</sup> A suspicion of affluence was typical of writers shaped by the

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<sup>117</sup> Hewison stresses that “‘Suez’ was a far more evocative image in 1958” than at the time of the crisis, so its effect was a longer process rather than a momentary impact. Hewison, 127-129.

<sup>118</sup> Ian Haywood, *Working-Class Fiction: from Chartism to Trainspotting* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1997), 92.

<sup>119</sup> Stuart Laing, *Representations of Working-Class Life 1957-1964* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986), 62.

<sup>120</sup> McKibbin, 528.

<sup>121</sup> John Sutherland, *Reading the Decades: Fifty Years of the Nation's Bestselling Books* (London: BBC Worldwide, 2002), 32.

interwar period; their sediments of class consciousness could not be easily removed by the promise of social mobility through education or work.<sup>122</sup> Inasmuch as young working-class writers were wary of contemporary ‘bread and circuses’, they could be said to be pessimistic about the prospect of reconciling ‘affluence’ with authenticity.

The case of Sillitoe exemplifies many of the literary and cultural transformations of the period. Although grouped with the Angry Young Men in later literary surveys, on his literary debut he was not regarded as such.<sup>123</sup> Perhaps it was merely bad timing, as by October 1958, when *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* was published, the media craze over the Angry Young Men was effectively over.<sup>124</sup> Initially the book was not a commercial hit, and only in late 1959, after the success of the film *Room at the Top*, did the producer Joseph Janni manage to secure funding for Sillitoe’s adaptation.<sup>125</sup> Film was where several of the young writers collaborated – and generated income from cinematic adaptations of their works, principally through Woodfall Films, the production company set up by Osborne and the director Tony Richardson.<sup>126</sup> The delayed commercial success of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* – fourteen reprints in five years – came with the almost simultaneous release of its film adaptation and the Pan paperback edition, whose cover featured stills from the controversial film. This was a turning point in British book history, both for the mutual

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<sup>122</sup> Haywood, 100; Alan Sinfield, *Literature Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain*, rev. ed. (London: The Athlone Press, 1997), 232-235.

<sup>123</sup> “I’ve never thought of myself as angry, particularly... I didn’t know John Braine or Kingsley Amis or John Osborne, and I hardly knew at all what they were writing. We’re all much unlike, as our subsequent work has shown. I don’t think I have been influenced by any of them in a significant way.” Sillitoe quoted in Joyce Rothschild, “The Growth of a Writer: an Interview with Alan Sillitoe,” *Southern Humanities Review* XX, 2 (Spring 1986), 133.

<sup>124</sup> Humphrey Carpenter, *The Angry Young Men: A Literary Comedy of the 1950s* (London: Penguin, 2002), 203-204.

<sup>125</sup> Laing, 119. The adaptation, directed by émigré director Karel Reisz, introduced stylistic elements from French *nouvelle vague* cinema into British social realism. The British New Wave, a working-class cinema, was forged; Marwick, *Society*, 118.

<sup>126</sup> The playwright Arnold Wesker joked that “There never was an Angry Young Man... On the contrary, we were very happy. Our work was being performed and we were earning more money in a year than in our entire lives until then”; quoted in Carpenter, 192.



advancement of a book and its film adaptation, and for a paperback best-seller being taken as 'serious fiction'.<sup>127</sup>

British publishing trends were also changing in the late 1950s. Previously, publishers saw working-class fiction as a risky business and were reluctant to pursue it, at least until the 1959 Roberts Act set up a national system of local public libraries, hedging publishers' investment in unusual new titles. This legislative step, together with the Angry Young Men fad, made the late 1950s and early 1960s a period of heavy cultural investment in working-class narratives.<sup>128</sup> Just preceding this change, Sillitoe's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* still had to rely on the trust of its young editor, Tom Maschler. Still, Maschler's confidence in Sillitoe was justified: Sillitoe drew extensively on his 1940s Nottingham working-class background, and readers were increasingly interested in 'that kind of book'. This interest was largely reductive: much of the novel's critical acclaim praised it "largely for its documentary qualities."<sup>129</sup>

Sillitoe's case illustrates a reading of fiction as journalism and of working-class authors as conduits of 'real' experience. *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* addressed a contemporary issue: what had the new, 'affluent' working class to complain about? Arthur Seaton's open enjoyment of affluence did not contrast with his otherwise unchanged life in local circles of family, factory and community. This also helped a non-working-class readership, curious about the 'New Estate' of 'affluent workers', and its relation to traditional working-class life.<sup>130</sup> The general persistence of popular ways of life and thought from the 1930s and 1940s, the quotidian violence, delinquency, and strong anti-authority sentiment in the new setting of the 1950s was represented by Sillitoe as the real working-class experience, prompting some critics to place the novel centrally in a "post-industrial minatory fiction" tradition going back to

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<sup>127</sup> Laing, 64-65. He outlines this process of transformation over three novels/adaptations: Braine's *Room at the Top* (1957/1959), Sillitoe's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1958/1960), and David Storey's *This Sporting Life* (1960/1962).

<sup>128</sup> Haywood, 93.

<sup>129</sup> Brannigan, 55; Harry Ritchie, *Success Stories: Literature and the Media in England, 1950-1959* (London: Faber & Faber, 1988), 198-200.

<sup>130</sup> Sinfield, 243, 256-257.

Dickens.<sup>131</sup> The novel's challenge to the idea of the quiescent, contented generation who had 'never had it so good' was one of its outstanding features.

An earlier influence on British literature in the first postwar decade was existentialism. Like working-class fiction, its readership was mainly middle-class, but whereas working-class fiction came 'from below', existentialism came from without, an accessible continental cultural import. French Existentialist works, both fiction and thought, arrived in Britain shortly after the war, starting with Camus's *L'Étranger*, translated by Stuart Gilbert as *The Outsider* (1942, reissued in 1946). Sartre's *Roads to Freedom* came in 1947, and hot on its heels followed *Existentialism and Humanism* and Camus's *The Plague* in 1948, Sartre's *Nausea* in 1949, and *What is Literature?* in 1950. This 'invasion' caused a stir in the British cultural discourse. Introducing and defending it, the critics Cyril Connolly (who prefaced Camus's English *Outsider*), Herbert Read and Stephen Spender, emphasised the shared premises of British and continental (particularly French) art. Read and Connolly embraced existentialism as expressing a conscience of constant revolution, daring romantically to defy empiricist insular traditions. The foreign and agitating element of existentialism was however challenged by the likes of T.S. Eliot and the philosopher A.J. Ayer, who rushed to defend established traditional home ground.<sup>132</sup>

Initially taken monolithically, French existentialism was viewed as problematic by British intellectuals politically constrained by Cold War allegiances. The existentialist understanding of freedom challenged preconceived ideological notions and was only taken on from 1952, after the Sartre-Camus rift following Camus's *The Rebel* and Sartre's fellow-travelling. Camus's espousal of political non-commitment and anti-communism, replacing political revolt with

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<sup>131</sup> Keith Wilson, "Arthur Seaton Twenty Years On: A Reappraisal of Sillitoe's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*," *English Studies in Canada* VII, 4 (December 1981), 414. Sillitoe rejected the autobiographical reading of the book and the 'working-class novel' label. See Alan Sillitoe, "Introduction to the 1979 Edition," *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*. (London: Flamingo Modern Classics, 1994 [1958]), 6. All subsequent page numbers refer to this edition

<sup>132</sup> One of Ayer's students, Olivier Todd, relayed his teacher's thoughts on 'the Alice-in-Wonderland logic' of non-being in *Being and Nothingness* to its author, his godfather. Sartre, who had hardly read critiques of his work, much less engaged with them, gleefully exclaimed "Ayer est un con!" Olivier Todd, *Un Fils rebelle* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1981), 90-91, 105.

a ‘metaphysical revolt’ allowed political quietism. This was more amenable to British intellectuals, who preferred to defend artistic freedom with public intellectual commitment coupled with political withdrawal.<sup>133</sup> One outspoken advocate of Sartrean existentialism was Iris Murdoch, an Oxford philosophy lecturer who, before her novelistic debut, had already published a monograph on Sartre (1953).<sup>134</sup> For Murdoch, Sartre was “a natural stepping-stone, in the 1940s, along a well-trodden path” from wartime communism to a later public disavowal of Marxism.<sup>135</sup> She was not uncritical of Sartre’s passion for a “big theoretical machine” and his inability to write a great novel; but she did discount these as symptomatic of a general contemporary predicament, “the spiritual crisis of our time” – the inability to express, except in abstract thought and ideology, “that the human person is precious and unique.”<sup>136</sup>

French existentialist thought was represented by its advocates in Britain as a grand rhetorical gesture of tragic heroism in the face of a “sense of absence and failure,” although probably not the same kind of failure (the occupation) it had faced in France.<sup>137</sup> Existentialism created another Angry Young Man, Colin Wilson, whose first published work, *The Outsider*, was a scandalous hit, widely known if not widely read.<sup>138</sup> Lifting its title from the Camus translation in order to suggest a conceptual link (and perhaps similar sales figures), the book was praised by Connolly and by Dame Edith Sitwell, who even wrote its dust-jacket

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<sup>133</sup> Sinfield, 86-91.

<sup>134</sup> Bryan Appleyard, *The Pleasures of Peace: Art and Imagination in Post-war Britain* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), 154.

<sup>135</sup> Watson, 81-82.

<sup>136</sup> Iris Murdoch, *Sartre* (London: Fontana, 1968 [1953]), 119-120. For another diagnosis of the Sartrean philosophy of crisis as decadent see: Norberto Bobbio, “The Decadentism of Sartre,” in his *The Philosophy of Decadentism: A Study in Existentialism*, trans. by D. Moore (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1948), 53-60.

<sup>137</sup> Appleyard, 53; Steven Connor suggests that 1950s British existentialism was mainly a popularised and faddish form of its French origins. Steven Connor, *The English Novel in History 1950-2000* (London: Routledge, 1996), 55.

<sup>138</sup> Carpenter, 112-113. Bernard Bergonzi, *Wartime and Aftermath: English Literature and its Background 1939-1960* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 173-174. Like Osborne’s Jimmy Porter, Wilson played the trumpet: Sinfield thinks this image elision to be part of an altogether “misunderstood, diluted, combined and appropriated” mixture of black American jazz, Beat culture and French existentialism in early 1950s Britain; Sinfield, 163.

blurb.<sup>139</sup> The book was a popular essay pitched as serious hardback literature, arguing passionately but loosely against the pessimism of French existentialism, mobilising against it the mysticism of Blake and others. Yet British existentialism had also had its local roots in English ‘personalism’, a kind of Anarchist quasi-existentialism linked with literary Neo-Romanticism. Wilson’s *Outsider*, too, stressed the “decay of conventionally-held cultural values” and treated this in personal, depoliticised terms, displacing material social problems to the realm of the mind; this was probably its real timeliness.<sup>140</sup>

The British reception of existentialism was still predominantly intellectual. In their respective ways Sartre and Camus carried their concept of freedom finally to the artist and writer, and Sartre also offered firm philosophical grounding for the role and status of intellectuals in society.<sup>141</sup> The ‘modern condition’ of the artist was encapsulated by Sartrean ‘alienation’ (a concept carrying its Marxist origins with it) and by Camus’s unaddressed yet pervasive ‘Angst’. To British postwar writers existentialism offered a systematic vocabulary, a thematic crux in cultural discourse, and an alternative to both modernist experimentation and traditional realism. To Sinfield, non-Movement, non-Modernist writings, like Wilson’s *Outsider*, shared with Beckett and Ionesco in France a concern with the overarching theme of Man’s existential predicament.<sup>142</sup> However, the literary reflection of the modern predicament also preoccupied Movement writers, who saw their brand of realism as a “rejection of what art has become.”<sup>143</sup>

Politically, the British take on Sartre’s postwar maxim of commitment became dominant in the late 1950s, just as the French discourse of *engagement* exhausted itself.<sup>144</sup> Adding to prior disillusionment with party politics, in

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<sup>139</sup> Carpenter, 107-111.

<sup>140</sup> Hewison, 131-132.

<sup>141</sup> Sinfield, 87, 90.

<sup>142</sup> Sinfield, 93, 189, 192.

<sup>143</sup> This, more than the progressive social realism, was a specifically conservative pessimism, informed by a “myth of a better past” and affecting “cultivatedly philistine sensibilities”; Appleyard, 96-97. Still, conservative critics like Herman regard twentieth-century cultural pessimism as characteristic of leftist attitudes; Herman, 445.

<sup>144</sup> Hewison, 174.

particular with Communism following the Hungarian invasion, this commitment was enacted in the New Left through anti-politics, committing instead to 'issues'. This took various forms, from the establishment of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) in 1958, to the elaborate critique of society through culture, as in the case of the work of Richard Hoggart, Michael Young, Raymond Williams, and Stuart Hall.<sup>145</sup> The political protest of New Left commitment was thus directed at the Old Left of the 1930s which, after the Attlee government, included not just the Labour Party establishment but State Establishment itself – Whitehall and the BBC. The adversarial pitting of 'new' against 'old' informs both the Angry Young Men in literature and the New Left in politics, converging around issues of commitment and disillusionment about individual transformative possibilities. Their intellectual pessimism, which mirrored similar, perhaps more deep-seated anxieties in France, will be discussed below.

### **British Culturalism: Leavis and After**

The reception of Sillitoe's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* quickly placed him in two distinct categories, as an Angry Young Man, and as a provincial writing 'proletarian' prose. The northern roots and working class tableaux linked Sillitoe to an imposing precedent – that of Nottingham born D.H. Lawrence. The comparison with Lawrence was not unjustified: both *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* and Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* (1913) are passionate fictionalised autobiographical tales of their authors' tough upbringing in working-class Nottingham, and of attempts to transcend these circumstances. Sillitoe admitted that Lawrence had been a major influence on his writing.<sup>146</sup> By the mid-1950s F.R. Leavis, too, declared Lawrence a literary giant, standing at the zenith of 'the Great Tradition' (the title of Leavis's 1948 book) of the English novel.

The valorisation of Lawrence by Leavis and the *Scrutiny* group is part of an important literary debate linking interwar and postwar English letters. The figure of Lawrence was central in Leavis' attempts to break away from the

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<sup>145</sup> Hewison, 175-176.

<sup>146</sup> Michel Lefranc, "Alan Sillitoe: An Interview with M. Lefranc," *Études Anglaises: Grande-Bretagne, États-Unis* XXVI, 1 (janvier-mars 1973), 36; John Sawkins, *The Long Apprenticeship: Alienation in the Early Work of Alan Sillitoe* (Oxford and Bern: Peter Lang, 2001), 85.

influence of his former mentor, T.S. Eliot, and from *The Criterion*, Eliot's literary review. He did this first by establishing his own review, *Scrutiny* (1932-53), and then by going on to argue against most of Eliot's major literary judgments, primarily his disdain for Lawrence as a religiously-inspired moraliser with a spiritually inadequate vision of intellectual independence.<sup>147</sup> Leavis was particularly animated by the close relations between Lawrence the suffering man and Lawrence the creating writer, whereas Eliot disapproved of the vision of literature as an expression of emotion and personality.<sup>148</sup> By the 1930s, Eliot had come to be identified with a pessimistic variety of literary modernism that was increasingly dismissive of contemporary culture as expressing a fractured, ungodly existence. As he concluded in 'Thoughts After Lambeth' (1931), "The World is trying the experiment of attempting to form a civilized but non-Christian mentality. The experiment will fail; but we must be very patient in awaiting its collapse; meanwhile redeeming the time."<sup>149</sup> Following his mentor's crisp and brusque style of critical writing, Leavis reinvested it with his own pathos, agenda and influences.<sup>150</sup>

First among those influences was a synthesis of cultural elitism with a gospel of culture as moral and intellectual guide (replacing religion), in the tradition of Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* (1869). A second influence on Leavis was I.A. Richards's 'practical criticism' (the title of his 1929 book), which advocated close reading as the sole scientific tool of the literary critic.

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<sup>147</sup> E.M. Forster lamented the low public profile of Lawrence's death in an obituary letter to *The Criterion* which Eliot dismissed, "along with Lawrence and his entire work". Forster suggested that Lawrence had actually written for the younger generation that matured over the 1940s. Macdonald Daly, "Lawrence, Leavis, and the Left," *Durham University Journal* 87, 2 (July 1995), 344-345.

<sup>148</sup> Cf. Barry J. Scherr, "Leavis' Revolt against Eliot: the Lawrence Connexion," *Recovering Literature: A Journal of Contextualist Criticism* 15 (Summer 1987), 42-44.

<sup>149</sup> George Watson, *The Literary Critics*, revised edition (London: The Hogarth Press, 1986 [1962]), 174; quoting Thomas Stearns Eliot, "Thoughts After Lambeth," *Selected Essays*, 3<sup>rd</sup> rev. edn. (London: Faber & Faber, 1951), 387.

<sup>150</sup> For critical accounts of Eliot and Leavis see Watson, *The Literary Critics*, 161-177, 187-194; for a more sympathetic account of the Leavises and *Scrutiny* see Francis Mulhern, *The Moment of Scrutiny* (London: New Left Books, 1979); Gary Day, *Re-reading Leavis: Culture and Literary Criticism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996).

Coincidentally, Richards, who placed great (and probably inordinate) trust in literary culture as a redemptive undertaking, also championed an Arnoldian revival in the interwar years. Arnold and Richards were taken up by Leavis and the *Scrutiny* group as key figures in the trajectory of European decline. Their pessimism also found vent in a nostalgically romantic view of a 'homogeneous reading public', made irredeemably extinct by industrialisation. This view was most fully articulated by Leavis's wife Queenie, in *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932), where she attempted an 'anthropological' approach to literature.<sup>151</sup> A third influence was Leavis's own experience in the Great War and a cultural pessimism inspired by reading Spengler. Leavis, who was haunted throughout his life by his military service in the First World War, was too young to appreciate the detached and somewhat rosy Edwardian premises of Bloomsbury liberalism. Instead he was fascinated by Spengler's *The Decline of the West*, a hugely popular book in the immediate aftermath of the Great War, and he read his contemporary discontents into Spengler.<sup>152</sup> Faced with the social crisis of the 1920s and 1930s, Leavis sought to reinvigorate culture and reform society in a way that would give it a new life, but which also revealed his misinterpretation of Spengler, who had condemned Western culture irretrievably. It is one of Leavis's self-contradictions that, drawing from unsentimental Spengler as well as on a nostalgic picture of extinct (or non-existent) communities, he advocated a reliance on culture and continuity as a means to reform and social change: essentially a gaze back as the way forward.

A final influence was that of Eliot, as poet and critic, which Leavis eventually rejected, seeing Eliot's modernism failing to deliver on its promise. Lawrence was but one, albeit major bone of contention between Eliot and Leavis throughout the 1930s, receiving Leavis's special attention from *Mass Civilization*

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<sup>151</sup> Iain Wright, "F.R. Leavis, the *Scrutiny* Movement and the Crisis," in *Culture and Crisis in Britain in the Thirties*, ed. by Jon Clark, Margot Heinemann, David Margolies and Carole Snee (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1979), 46-49, 60 n.13.

<sup>152</sup> Wright notes that Leavis was quoting Spengler extensively as early as 1930. Wright, 41-42; D.L. LeMahieu, *A Culture for Democracy: Mass Communication and the Cultivated Mind in Britain Between the Wars* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 298-299, 302.

and *Minority Culture* (1930) and especially *D.H. Lawrence: Novelist* (1955).<sup>153</sup> Besides the Lawrence issue, Leavis, a 'revolutionary conservative' type like his old master, adopted Eliot's notion of 'tradition', in the sense of hard labour and research pitted against romantic individualism.<sup>154</sup> By the 1940s Leavis and Eliot developed differing understandings of 'tradition'. Leavis came to define 'tradition' as a historical-cultural trajectory of literary moral concern laced with vitalism, as expressed by George Eliot, Joseph Conrad and primarily D.H. Lawrence – authors whose work Eliot had rejected expressly for reasons of ungodly, lax morality and individualistic disrespect for 'tradition'. Eliot's American origins and broad, European-oriented outlook became increasingly foreign to Leavis, who dealt with culture more narrowly defined along national lines of Englishness. Leavis eventually remarked on Eliot's un-Englishness and how foreign his brand of modernism was to English literature.<sup>155</sup>

The critical rivalry of Leavis and Eliot highlights two distinct strains of contemporary cultural pessimism. Eliot's is a bleaker, modernist pessimism, that of displacement, exile and alienation. As he grew older, his vision was increasingly infused with a normative sense of Anglo-Catholic spirituality and obligation. Leavis is a nostalgic cultural pessimist, whose 'negative classicism' yearned for a golden age of self-sufficient pre-industrial life. To him good writing revolved around moral concern, 'concrete' vitalism and nostalgia, which are closely linked with an agnostic 'groundedness' in national values (if not essences). These differences demonstrate the various and divergent faces of cultural pessimism, and Eliot's influence on Leavis without requiring their reconciliation.

The influence of Eliot on Leavis could be felt in the new voices that assessed contemporary culture through its literature and linked the study of culture and the critique of socioeconomic conditions. The two most notable

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<sup>153</sup> The Lawrence book, like *The Great Tradition* before it, collected articles Leavis had previously published in *Scrutiny*, allowing him to reach new readers beyond the limited subscription of *Scrutiny*.

<sup>154</sup> This was argued in Eliot's 1919 essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent".

<sup>155</sup> "I am a fellow-countryman of D.H. Lawrence. Mr. Eliot is not – the fact that is in any case sufficiently obvious insists here upon recognition." F.R. Leavis, "Mr. Eliot and Mr. Lawrence," *Scrutiny* 18 (1951), 56; quoted and discussed in Scherr, 93-94.



publications of the latter kind were Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1957) and Raymond Williams's *Culture and Society* (1958).<sup>156</sup> Of the two, Hoggart was closer to the Leavis brand of cultural pessimism and shared his vilification of 'mass civilisation' and its hegemonic machinations as 'shiny barbarism'. Like Leavis, Hoggart's critique was coloured by moral concern and nostalgia, and highly personalised: *The Uses of Literacy* is a mixture of autobiographical and sociological observations about the Leeds he had known. Williams, who was, like Leavis, a member of the Cambridge English faculty but unlike him was committed to Marxism, offered a more benign view of human potentiality which rejected the definition of 'mass' from a position of exclusionary cultural elitism. Nevertheless, Williams's history of the idea of culture in England suggests the importance of the Leavis (and Arnold) tradition of cultural thought: culture had increasingly come to mean something distinct from society and from history, an independent, ahistorical cumulative cache, which, for its intrinsic value, was untouched by rampant utilitarianism but which still must be protected from 'the masses'. Against this understanding Williams suggested an essentially anthropological definition, that of culture as a whole way of life. This led him to explore culture not normatively, as 'high' or elite, but descriptively, as 'ordinary'.

Williams and Hoggart must be understood in the context of disenchantment among the British left intelligentsia following the political and ideological developments of the postwar decade and particularly of 1956. Both were particularly concerned with the indigenous cultures of the British working classes that were seemingly threatened by their social advancement in postwar affluence. The postwar working classes seemed poised to be 'improved' out of existence by their *embourgeoisement*, however welcome the actual improvement in their lives was. Like Williams and Hoggart, other New Left socialist thinkers and critics, including Stuart Hall, E.P. Thompson and Perry Anderson, sought to

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<sup>156</sup> Both books are similar to Sillitoe's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* in being products of long contemplation, taking several years to complete. Michael Skovmand, "Culture, Anger, Community: Hoggart, Williams, and the Strange Conjunction of the Late Fifties," *The Dolphin: Publications of the English Department, University of Aarhus* 4 (December 1980), 60.

restore the image of the contemporary and historical working class as ‘authentic’ cultures and as the source of the future social revolution.<sup>157</sup>

The New Left and cultural studies moment was also related to imperial dismantling insofar as it affected English writing. Jed Esty suggests that English cultural studies took decolonisation as an opportunity to consolidate national culture and repair it, indeed to rethink the nation as defined by its local culture, rather than by its imperial power. For these leftist thinkers, Suez was as important as Hungary, and the two were effectively linked. Both enabled a recovery of England’s cultural particularity by redefining it first as a minor culture, a shrinking island, and then as post- or de-modernised, somehow preserving Marxist class conflict in industrial England within nativist Anglocentric wholeness.<sup>158</sup> This ‘English exception’ was “both a cultural essence and an essential culturelessness,” and the decolonisation of the English meant “not only to demystify the myths of English cohesion and insularity... but also to demystify English universalism” – thus inspiring an adaptation of tradition (through cultural studies) as well as its fetishisation in ‘heritage’ (discussed in the next section).<sup>159</sup>

Williams and Hoggart’s legacy in the study of English culture was also institutional. Both contributed to the foundation of English cultural studies as an academic field, endowing it with many of the themes, concepts and methods that have subsequently become associated with it. In 1964 Hoggart joined the founding team of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), its first ever dedicated university unit. However, the CCCS only made its impact on British social research from the late 1960s and early 1970s, when it managed to break through the traditional intellectual embarrassment about analysing mass culture seriously.<sup>160</sup> In the 1950s and early 1960s, the prevalent

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<sup>157</sup> See Haywood, 92-93.

<sup>158</sup> Jed Esty, *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and the National Culture in England* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), 7-8, 20-21, 175, 187.

<sup>159</sup> Esty uses the language of myths and mystification that will be discussed in the following chapter through Barthes’s *Mythologies*. Esty, 196, 224.

<sup>160</sup> Bentley enumerates several of the early studies; Nick Bentley, “The Young Ones: A Reassessment of the British New Left’s Representation of 1950s Youth Subcultures,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* vol. 8, no. 1 (2005), 65-83 (67); Sinfield, 154.

institutional-intellectual trends in Britain were still an inward-looking empiricism and a resistance to metaphysical ‘big issues’ associated with continental thought. As discussed, Structuralism and Sartrean existentialism made it across the Channel and became popular in some quarters but then were not taken up by scholars in a significant way.<sup>161</sup> Gradually, the scholarship boys became new dons for ‘new universities’ and after the mid-1960s student culture converged with popular youth culture.<sup>162</sup> In turn, as part of its examination of mass- and popular culture, the CCCS influenced scholarly attitudes to youth, as we will see in the third section of this thesis.<sup>163</sup>

In political terms, Williams and Hoggart were true to their principles, involved in adult education and acting as vocal cultural critics in the media, not least through the new journal *New Left Review*: on its launch in 1960 they were both on its editorial board, headed by Stuart Hall, and subsequently contributed to it extensively.<sup>164</sup> More broadly, the New Left movement was somewhat unfocused and did not seem to cohere around a clear set of objectives. This was exemplified by two collective manifestos of the late 1950s, *Declaration* (1957, edited by Tom Maschler, shortly afterwards Sillitoe’s editor) and *Conviction* (1958, edited by Norman MacKenzie), to which Williams and Hoggart contributed essays. *Declaration* grouped together several writers associated with the new literary trends, like Wain, Osborne, Wilson and Doris Lessing, together

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<sup>161</sup> Marwick, *Society*, 72.

<sup>162</sup> Sinfield, 287.

<sup>163</sup> CCCS studies liberalised previously disapproving approaches to youth, suggesting that various youth “subcultural styles were strategies of symbolic resistance,” informed not just by generation but by structural considerations of society, that is, by class; Osgerby, *Youth*, 71. Major youth studies of CCCS include: Phil Cohen, “Subcultural Conflict and Working-Class Community,” *Working Papers in Cultural Studies* 2 (1972), 4-51; *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*, ed. by Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (London: Unwin Hyman, 1976); and Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 1979).

<sup>164</sup> *New Left Review* was created through the union of two older publications, *Universities and Left Review* and *New Reasoner*. Hoggart was certainly more influential on public affairs than Williams, going on to testify in favour of Lawrence’s banned *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, to participate in the Albemarle and Pilkington committees and the Arts Council, and even to serve as assistant director-general of UNESCO.

with Tynan, Osborne's champion, and film director Lindsay Anderson, to address contemporary issues. As a point of convergence between so-called Angry Young Men and other dissatisfied persons more clearly identified with the New Left, *Declaration* has come to be regarded mainly as a self-serving and confused manifesto, its sense of urgency mainly directed at ushering in the new self-proclaimed intelligentsia and to oust the still-prevalent elitist establishment. In that sense, *Conviction* was a clearer gesture toward the political, in both roster (Hoggart, Williams, the already disillusioned Iris Murdoch) and content. Topics discussed included the recently established CND, new directions for the Left in the face of *embourgeoisement* and growing popular cynicism, and the waning influence of the Labour party facing Macmillan's growing popularity.<sup>165</sup>

*Declaration* and *Conviction* are but two examples of a larger trend outlined above, showing the British interpretation of Sartrean commitment – on both sides of the Channel mainly a left-wing ideal – as a move away from party politics and towards ad-hoc convergence around positions and issues. *Declaration* certainly illustrated underlying confusions, along with anxieties for self-establishment and deposition of existing elites, not only regarding definitions of politics and principle, but also along generational distinctions. The new voices all matured during or shortly after the Second World War, and sought footholds for themselves in an otherwise outdated British structure of governance. The socioeconomic transformations that enabled most of them to advance to their positions in the late 1950s were proof of a changed social order that, not being reflected in official culture, imposed a low glass ceiling over them. The New Left, cultural studies, 'Angry' and working-class fiction – all protested a widening gap between the way things ought to have been and the way they were, and all expressed disillusionment with traditional or conventional forms of protest and transformative action. Effectively, only their own idealism stood between this and a similar disillusionment with their own chosen methods.

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<sup>165</sup> On *Declaration*, see Carpenter, 177-185; on *Conviction*, see Hewison, 176-177; for a comparison and assessment of the two, see Skovmand, 73-79.

## Sillitoe and *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*

Sillitoe has always maintained that while he had read widely in Sartre and Camus their work did not directly influence *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*.<sup>166</sup> It was realism Sillitoe claims to have had in mind, not existentialism. Moreover, he intimates that “‘typical’ is not what I wanted Arthur Seaton to appear” but rather as much “an individual in some way recognizable by those who worked and lived in similar conditions.”<sup>167</sup> Arthur was then to be familiar but distinct, so his story would not be taken schematically either as a working man’s morality tale or as an existentialist tale of the general human condition.

Nevertheless, many scholars read *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* in terms of existentialist thematics. Existentialism underlay many of Lefranc’s questions to Sillitoe, for example, and is central to Nardela’s interpretation.<sup>168</sup> Bergonzi thinks that sympathetically but without collusion, “Sillitoe presents Arthur as an existentialist hero, asserting the values of selfhood against an inert world.”<sup>169</sup> Several other existentialist themes are clearly present in the novel: the modern predicament of man’s life in a mechanical environment which distances him from nature and authenticity; the consequent sense of entrapment in life and its cycles of factory, family, community, convention; the contempt for stifling familiarity and even proximity (echoing Sartre’s *Huis Clos*); and an absurd ambivalence toward solitude, powered by opposing drives of sociality and

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<sup>166</sup> “I read [Sartre’s] novels and his stories but I haven’t read his long philosophical books. On the other hand I read Camus quite a lot... It’s difficult to say whom I have affinities with... Just after the war and for quite a long time, one was very much influenced by Sartre. He was a great influence in English writing... I read all his books, the fiction, and I read Camus quite a lot. The mixture obviously had some influence. But I think apart from that if I had not known about Sartre, I think I would still have made these characters as they were, somehow.” Lefranc, 41; Sillitoe, “Introduction to the 1979 Edition,” 6.

<sup>167</sup> Alan Sillitoe, *Life Without Armour* (London: HarperCollins, 1995), 252.

<sup>168</sup> Nardela sees Arthur living in an “existential universe” (470), fighting “existential nausea” and the “thirst of a wastelander” (471), living raucously as “a hedge against isolation” (473), and searching for his “vital self” and defining “himself for himself” so as “to live with nothingness” (469). Anna Ryan Nardela, “The Existential Dilemma of Alan Sillitoe’s Working-Class Heroes,” *Studies in the Novel* 5, 4 (winter 1973), 469-482.

<sup>169</sup> Bergonzi, 150; Laing, 79.

misanthropy. In many ways, Arthur Seaton's narrative can be considered existentialist.<sup>170</sup>

To discuss *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* along the lines of existentialist thematics is to read it as a culturally pessimistic narrative: after all, Sartrean 'alienation' was a result of a perceived decline in the social state of affairs, the 'modern condition', a systematic figuration of modern pessimism.<sup>171</sup> This introduces an interpretive template and a second-order unity to the unfolding of the plot, supporting its own formal, narrative unity.<sup>172</sup> Arthur Seaton feels alienated from anything and anyone outside of his immediate social sphere – the government, the military, the factory hierarchy (excepting his foreman), even most of his town folk – and he is mostly, by self-definition and by action, his own man. His present-oriented life, misdirected violence, abuse of himself and others, and dogmatic rationalisations of these, are all reflective of his dormant stage of Sartrean 'bad faith' (*mauvaise foi*). Eventually he comes to a distressing realisation of this, one that leads him to re-evaluate his situation and to change his demeanour and attitude toward himself and the world. Even before it becomes the "symbolic moment of transformation" in the novel, the move from Saturday night to Sunday morning serves as a "redemptive time" of growth, when Arthur gains enough inner distance from his life to question it.<sup>173</sup>

Shortly after the novel's appearance, Sillitoe expressed his disdain for an emergent 'bread and circuses' attitude, hoping to have shown in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* its rejection by contemporary workers who "show some sign of being beyond the reach of dead symbols and false values."<sup>174</sup> The novel's

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<sup>170</sup> Dominic Head, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction, 1950-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 4.

<sup>171</sup> British writers of the 1950s engaged with Sartre's earlier, ontological notion of alienation. This dated back to his work of the 1930s, which only arrived in Britain in the late 1940s. His later, Marxian notion of alienation was only formulated in *Critique de la raison dialectique* (1960), and similarly took about 15 years to be translated.

<sup>172</sup> Even Sawkins, a highly sympathetic reader, acknowledges that the novel's raw materials – short stories, sketches, and poems – were put together in a way that made an episodic, even fragmented text, and that some passages are quite redundant. Sawkins, 66.

<sup>173</sup> Quoted from Brannigan, 58; see also Haywood, 103.

<sup>174</sup> Alan Sillitoe, "Both Sides of the Street," *Times Literary Supplement* (8 July 1960), 435; Laing, 66.

existential rebellion is against bad faith, characteristic of late-1950s British mindless hedonism. This is Sillitoe's defiant reply both to the Establishment and to those who, like Amis and Braine, purport to rebel against it, producing instead rather "peaceful" and unthreatening fictional gestures that indicated a "shift in sensibility" rather than a counter-current.<sup>175</sup> Jim Dixon and Joe Lampton, like their respective creators, were struggling social climbers whose hunger was sated by their very success, disclosing what was otherwise an approving outlook on contemporary Britain. Arthur Seaton, on the other hand, fights with his back to the wall, participating in an existential struggle against self and circumstances, the success of which is uncertain and temporary, and thus absurd. As with many of his contemporaries from working-class backgrounds, Sillitoe's gesture was informed by traces of old interwar and wartime working-class consciousness that implicitly cast those days nostalgically as (in some ways) the 'good old days' and that viewed the 1950s as representing a falling off in consciousness.

### *Machines and Violence*

Arthur acknowledges becoming an extension of his lathe, doing repetitive, menial work; this only rewards him with money, itself of no 'real' value, buying him momentary pleasures but not redeeming him from daily struggle. Sillitoe blends organic and mechanical by describing them in each other's terms: generators sound like whining cats; Arthur's Saturday night drinks are to him "high octane fuel" (10); he throws punches "as if he were a robot" (107); and the factory motor stoops at the back of the hall like a stranded whale.<sup>176</sup> When Arthur and his brother Fred clash with the drunken driver and overturn his car, Sillitoe's account encapsulates "in a single moment the conflicting values – machine/human, artificial/natural, dull weight/exhilarating lightness, submission/assertion – that the novel explores."<sup>177</sup> This helps explain Arthur's violence, and most violence in the novel, as constructive: not gratuitous but transformative. Overturning the car is serious rather than reckless; it is about everything the car stands for – a sublimated existential struggle elucidated only

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<sup>175</sup> Bergonzi, 206.

<sup>176</sup> Wilson, 415, 421.

<sup>177</sup> Wilson, 420.

by the narration. "Is Arthur abnormally violent?" wondered Sillitoe, "He probably is... It's a way of maintaining his own identity, the only way he knows perhaps is to overcompensate by violence."<sup>178</sup> Another act of violence, Jane whacking Jim over the head at Aunt Ada's Christmas party, leads to Arthur's reckoning. It is preceded by the drunkard breaking the undertaker's window: "Arthur was stirred by the sound of breaking glass: it synthesized all the anarchism within him and was the most perfect and suitable noise to accompany *the end of the world and himself*" (108, my italics).

Arthur's violence is provoked by a sense of entrapment as his life and circumstances close in on him. Sillitoe admits as much of the obvious loci, the army and the factory: "they're all prisons, some slightly more agreeable than others."<sup>179</sup> The regularity of community and family time-cycles and temporal milestones is almost parodic at times (falling out over football results on Saturday evening to reconcile over Family Favourites on Sunday morning), and, following Brenda's remark, Arthur experiences them as a disquieting "personal *memento mori*."<sup>180</sup> To Wilson, Arthur's contempt for this intimacy is understandable: "tribal activity seems always to provoke eventual division and the assertion of isolation or individualism; community seems always to break down in a display of unenlightened self-interest."<sup>181</sup> In his withdrawal, Arthur is left with no friends outside his family and, perhaps, his women. Even so, Sillitoe insists that Arthur is not so solitary: "He is in a factory all day and when you're working, you can't talk. When you are out of the factory, you find more immediate things to do than... go through the subtleties of establishing a friendship."<sup>182</sup> Shaped in part by material conditions, Arthur's social life leaves him alive enough to feel contented in some elementary way, but no more.

Becoming more aware of his flawed life, Arthur tries to put it right, although marrying Doreen as he intends is not the obvious solution. For Sillitoe at his most Lawrentian, "Solitude is in a sense craving after comfort and death...

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<sup>178</sup> Lefranc, 45-46.

<sup>179</sup> Sillitoe quoted in John Halperin, "Interview with Alan Sillitoe," *Modern Fiction Studies* 25, 2 (summer 1979), 186.

<sup>180</sup> Wilson, 416.

<sup>181</sup> Wilson, 418.

<sup>182</sup> Lefranc, 42.



When two people come together... that's the life force taking over. He sort of swings between the two"; therefore, "violence takes place when he is in limbo between the two... In his case it is certainly a way of defence against isolation and also against assimilation... the worse sort of defence because the most expensive and the most destructive."<sup>183</sup> So Arthur does not choose Doreen for romantic reasons, and being his girlfriend does not privilege her over other people in his life; indeed, she performs a similar function to other people in Arthur's orbit, namely affirming him without smothering his self.<sup>184</sup> Again we come to recognize Arthur's violence as a regulating, transformative practice used to maintain identity, only not always as positive or stabilizing as Wilson suggests. Arthur's violence might be an *acte gratuit*, gratuitous, unpremeditated action: as he instinctively resorts to it he has not fully shaken off his existential slumber and awakened his consciousness to the responsibilities of free choice.

Arthur Seaton could be described as trying to be what Lionel Trilling called "the Opposing Self" in his eponymous book of 1955.<sup>185</sup> Taken from a remark on the eighteenth-century young individual that Trilling attributed to Hegel, Arthur as literary hero opposes his self to the culture in which he has grown, and makes this a salient element of his self-definition. Loyal kinsman and kind lover though he is, Arthur's first allegiance is to himself alone, and only from his individual authentic experience is his character animated – in ways which, unsurprisingly, make him an enigma to people around him, like Doreen and his brother Fred. Arthur also makes a point of assessing people by their demeanour (42-43) and taking this as an advantage he has over them, as he resists the social and so resists being 'read'. Yet at the beginning of the novel "he had not thought of applying [the character perception] with any great force to himself" (43), and perhaps that is why he has not been able to 'weigh-up' Jack,

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<sup>183</sup> Lefranc, 46.

<sup>184</sup> This picture of human psychology goes back to Sartre, and from him to Kojève and Hegel. Of the three primary modes of being – in itself (*en-soi*), for itself (*pour-soi*), and for-others (*pour-autrui*) – the third is the most important and most problematic as agent of the human economy of desires, chiefly the desire-for-the-desire-of-the-other, our need for social or intersubjective affirmation.

<sup>185</sup> Lionel Trilling, *The Opposing Self: Nine Essays in Criticism* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1955).

his factory colleague and Brenda's cuckolded husband. Coming from a similar background, Jack represents Arthur's *Doppelgänger* figure, personifying the choices Arthur actively avoided: committing to a job, to a wife, to parenthood. Towards the conclusion, as Arthur gets to know himself better, he is reconciled with Jack (188-190), and at this point of agreement on their differences the gap between them and their respective choices begins to close, as Arthur consequently comes to choose commitment and sociality over being an opposing, but lonely, self.

An interesting aspect of Arthur's consciousness is his full and mature awareness of his social condition as a worker, which complements our picture of his physical self at work with which we began. To Arthur, his work is more than the necessary and bothersome passage of exertion to the end of the working day, when 'real life' begins in his leisure time. His time at work is a time of accomplishment, a time for some social contact (as much as he cares to allow) and a time for looking toward the future. His alienation from work enables an inner distance from it, thus creating his 'room of one's own' in his mind because, being his only waking time alone, "it was the only time you have to think, and... you thought some lovely and marvellous things" (39). In fact, it is noteworthy that Arthur does see a future in his work, although he reminds himself that if it does not progress he can leave the bicycle factory and go to work somewhere else – a recent privilege born of postwar full employment policies.<sup>186</sup>

Arthur works his lathe expertly, but he is also acutely aware of his social position as a factory worker. His gaffer and the factory hierarchy are 'the enemy' (61), barely tolerable, with which a truce is struck once a week, on the occasion of the pay packet (40). Arthur enjoys his job and appreciates its benefits, but is also acutely aware of a social and organisational structure of exploitation, which he accepts pragmatically, perhaps cynically, as it keeps him in Teddy boy suits and drinking to his heart's content (202). Still, he seems to content himself with *knowing* the structure of manipulation, having *figured it out*: "this lathe is my everlasting pal because it gets me thinking" (202). He will try to "screw the world" mainly to get even, "because it's trying to do the same to me" (203), but

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<sup>186</sup> D.J. Taylor, *After the War: The Novel and English Society since 1945* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993), 113.

he is not interested in political change, which he regards as futile: “there ain’t much you can do about it unless you start making dynamite” (202). D.J. Taylor takes Arthur as an exemplary case of British working-class quietism, “both in Seaton’s selfish anarchism and in the respectfully adhered to gradations of the world in which he operates.”<sup>187</sup> It is this political quietism, rooted in “dissociation from official or public forms of life,” together with the wait for things to happen because ‘you never can tell’ that makes Arthur a representative figure of his milieu. As Hoggart puts it half-nostalgically, half-ironically, “the working classes have been cheerful existentialists for centuries.”<sup>188</sup>

But Sillitoe’s stress on Arthur’s mental processes could also be seen as the kernel of his rebellion. Not being materialistic or socially ambitious, Arthur resists conspicuous mass consumption and the prospect of ‘moving up’ (perhaps to lower middle class status) in life, but the reader is impressed by the centrality of independent thought, and nonconformism in general, to his existence. In this mentality all authoritative institutions and figures are equally oppressive facets of the same overarching racket. Arthur rages violently against this order of things, and his anarchistic rage, however unfocused and ultimately self-damaging, is still more authentic than the conformist responses of most of his working-class milieu, which antagonise him just as well.<sup>189</sup> This aspiring class was dazzled by the promise of welfare and respectability, and in 1959 voted *en masse* for the incumbent Conservatives, believing Macmillan’s assertion of 20 July 1957 that they had ‘never had it so good’. What Taylor described as the working-class dissociation from official life could therefore be seen as part of a wider (temporary) depoliticisation of the public sphere in an age of social and political transition.

### *Escape*

As this thesis does not engage in a literary-critical study, formal considerations of fiction are not normally its concern. However, formal considerations are relevant in the case of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, to the extent that, in

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<sup>187</sup> Taylor, 128.

<sup>188</sup> Quoted in Taylor, 113, 116.

<sup>189</sup> Haywood, 100-103.

and of themselves, they embody thematic concerns. Gillian Hanson suggests that in many of his works, and not just in his first novel, Sillitoe makes use of a narrative structure of “existential escape.”<sup>190</sup> His version of existential escape is different from those found in his contemporaries (Hanson mentions Wain, Braine and Waterhouse), as it is a twofold escape: a physical escape that heightens the need for a mental breakthrough, and then a mental transformation amounting to an escape from a previous rut. And Arthur does live in a mental rut, “a man who has his earthly bread but not his spiritual bread. He has no spiritual values because the kind of conditions he lives in do not allow him to have any.”<sup>191</sup> This also translated into a technical, formal difficulty for Sillitoe, namely: how to write a book about a man who has never read a book.<sup>192</sup>

Arthur has some rules of thumb to guide him through the great campaign of life, most memorably in the repeated “it’s a good life, if you don’t weaken”, but his course is largely aimless and only oriented toward the here-and-now and the next pleasurable event, reacting rather than acting. Otherwise it’s “hard work and good wages, and a smell all day that turns your guts” (30). This closed circuit is revealed in Arthur’s internal monologues as too close for comfort. For all the newfound relative affluence he and his peers enjoy, there is a sense that power and influence are forever elsewhere, with the faceless “them at the top” (131) who “think they’ve settled our hashes with their insurance cards and television sets” (132).<sup>193</sup> The only two exits out of his entrapment that Arthur sees are winning the pools (blind luck) or the onset of a Third World War (apocalypse brought on by the folly of those “higher up”).<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> Gillian Mary Hanson, *Understanding Alan Sillitoe* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1999), 26. She suggests that British versions of existentialism “very often presented through the lives of the working class who, both isolated and trapped in the new sociological and economic situations... found the need for escape imperative though all too often impossible.” Hanson, 29.

<sup>191</sup> Sillitoe quoted in Hanson, 32.

<sup>192</sup> The novel’s shifts in style and narration can be seen as ways of tackling that challenge; Laing, 69.

<sup>193</sup> Connor, 55.

<sup>194</sup> Scanlan suggests that fictional apocalypse and its imaginary scenarios function as the levelling, nihilistic reaction of the oppressed. The symbolic ending of history enacts the anger and desperation of the oppressed and excluded. Arthur’s two perceived exits, luck and

Arthur's violence is to Sillitoe a key to understanding him as both an individual and as part of a collectivity, "like a key that opens the door to psychological situations that go further then the mere act of violence."<sup>195</sup> Still, individually and socially Arthur's state of bad faith allows him to hide away his depersonalised, alienated, desperate reality: "now Jack's... happy, and I'm happy, and I know Brenda's happy. Everybody's happy. It's a fine world sometimes..." (40). This bad faith is sustained piecemeal: once by his wild weekend life, that of casual encounters with (mainly unhappily married) women and drinking himself into a stupor; and again when he escapes into his inner world of pipe dreams while working at his lathe (37-38). Arthur is happy to indulge away his cares: "To be alone seemed a continuation of his drugged life at the lathe. He wanted noise, to drink and to make love" (170).

Chapter 13 is Arthur's watershed, where his world picture falls apart. Up to that point he generally 'got away with it' rather than 'taken it', enjoying cutting corners and escaping blame rather than acting in a premeditated, responsible way. Now he is finally caught and roughed up by the 'swaddies', and as he convalesces at home, his lack of motivation, vulnerability and terror creep up on him: "he felt a lack of security. No place existed in all the world that could be called safe, and he knew for the first time in his life that there had never been any such thing as safety, and never would be, the difference being that now he knew it was a fact, whereas before it was a natural unconscious state" (183). Arthur implicitly realises that what he perceives as safety stands as things are at a reverse ratio to his hitherto prized freedom. This is resolved in his life-affirming peak experience in chapter 14 on the Christmas he celebrates with his aunt and cousins: "feeling strange and joyfully alive, as if he had been living in a soulless vacuum since his fight with the swaddies. He told himself that he had been without life since then, that now he was awake once more, ready to tackle all obstacles" (201).

The rest of the "Sunday Morning" part of the book, chapters 15 and 16, shows Arthur gaining a new perspective on his life and for the first time deciding

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catastrophe, suggest that in the present state of affairs he sees no real way of advancing himself. Margaret Scanlan, *Traces of Another Time: History and Politics in Postwar British Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 17-18.

<sup>195</sup> Hanson, 37; Lefranc, 40.

to commit to the social world (rather than remain an outsider) and to Doreen (rather than to scavenge on the passions of married women). In the process he realises the positive potential of this: “One more chance, he said to himself”; and later “Well, it’s a good life and a good world, all said and done, if you don’t weaken, and if you know that the big wide world hasn’t heard from you yet, no, not by a long way, though it won’t be long now” (219). Antagonised by mass culture and adamant to pursue his existential ‘essence’, Arthur’s direction is pointed out in the novel’s conclusion as a path of personal, individual growth rather than a renewed ‘engagement’.<sup>196</sup> Consider the fishing scene, an image of (precarious) control and (inconclusively) regained balance, in which Arthur looks his caught fish in the eye, reaching a fleeting moment of eye-to-eye-ness, of equilibrium, of seeing himself mirrored in nature, the fish’s state analogous to his own: “one more chance... it’s trouble for you and trouble for me.. And trouble for me it’ll be, fighting every day until I die” (219).<sup>197</sup> Thinking the world is ‘fine’ or ‘good’ is only a temporary condition.

Arthur’s inner monologue in the last lines of the novel – “you know that the big wide world hasn’t heard from you yet” (219) – might suggest a third escape, beyond the physical and mental escapes suggested above. The answer remains unclear and depends on what qualifies it. By comparison, Arthur does not have the clear direction of D.H. Lawrence’s Paul Morel in *Sons and Lovers* in becoming a writer, nor does he share Lawrence’s romanticised vision of “the city’s gold phosphorescence” as a “glowing town.”<sup>198</sup> Arthur’s horizon seems more blurred by immediate, concrete concerns, even though he trusts (perhaps all too eagerly) that “it won’t be long now” (219). It is equally likely that ‘the big wide world’ will not hear of Arthur. Beyond the novel itself, Sillitoe suggested

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<sup>196</sup> Laing suggests that accepting reality and making the best of it involved suspending other options, “particularly that of ‘culture’ as a way of giving life meaning.” Laing, 76.

<sup>197</sup> Similar fishing endings are found in T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and Ernest Hemingway’s *In Our Time*. The analogy of the working-class person to tinned fish is also featured in Sid Chaplin’s *The Day of the Sardine* (1962).

<sup>198</sup> D.H. Lawrence, *Sons and Lovers* (New York: Penguin, 1976 [1913]), 420.

Arthur “is certainly coming down for a rest,” with no further escapes expected as he suspends his struggle.<sup>199</sup>

There is little doubt that British society in the 1950s was changing considerably. Indeed, unlike politics, which took much longer to reflect social transformation, the new kinds of cultural production and new patterns of cultural consumption were soon widely apparent. However, the change itself was for some a cause for concern, and its perceived direction even more so. The erosion of the old middle class was reflected in the erosion of the relative value of their cultural canon, a Great Tradition under threat by new styles of fiction and by entertainment-oriented mass communications. This cultural turn was also the source of discontents among working-class observers, who feared it came at the cost of community cohesion and cultural authenticity, in favour of a uniform ‘bread and circuses’ mass culture that, while displacing old cultural class differences, was preserving the structure of class oppression. In this context, too, Arthur Seaton’s struggle from Saturday night to Sunday morning gives the impression that an escape into another reality, or even to another representation (or experience) of reality, is impossible. This opinion, that individual and class struggles were frustrated by their definition, is also reflected in Genet’s *Le Balcon* and in several other opinions discussed in the following chapter.

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<sup>199</sup> Sillitoe quoted in Lefranc, 46. The trilogy taken to be this novel’s sequel starts with *The Death of William Posters* (1965) and shows its protagonist Frank Dawley (originally Arthur Seaton, but Sillitoe felt constrained by his previous character) leave home after several years of marriage for more picaresque adventures motivated by his political commitment. Recently Sillitoe came full circle with Arthur in *Birthday* (2001), where Brian, his brother, visits him in Nottingham about forty years on. By then, Arthur is a changed man, barely recognisable as his old self.

## ***Chapter 2: Cultural Pessimism and French Social Structure***

In 1944 France faced the tasks of material reconstruction and of reunifying a politically, regionally and economically fragmented society. France and Frenchness had to be redefined on a basis that steered discussion away from the divisive legacy of wartime collaboration and resistance. This role was assumed by the state under de Gaulle's Fifth Republic in what became known as 'the Gaullist myth'. Yet France's bourgeois hegemonic culture was traditionally interlinked with its national definition, providing its own stock of longstanding myths, not just of Frenchness but also of the French Empire, French modernisation, and aspects of everyday life. Partaking in these myths served to perpetuate the social order they supported, and contributed to the relative stability of French social structure throughout the period observed.

This chapter will interpret several French attitudes toward social structure as manifesting pessimistic tropes. It will begin by observing the discourse which pitted a universal, normative Culture against the plurality of actual lived, primordial, local popular cultures. This discourse, drawing on considerations of canon, national utility, public improvement and leisure management, became increasingly important as the locus of fears for the continuity of French identity. Attempts to redefine Culture, by public educators, academic and public intellectuals, and the State itself, indicated converging anxieties about its prospects. The gap between descriptive and normative understandings of culture, widest among the working classes, particularly fascinated left-wing intellectuals, and later influenced the late 1960s and 1970s French intellectual fascination with Maoism.

Class was not as central to French social outlooks as it was to their British counterparts. In line with its bourgeois or petty-bourgeois character, French public discourse on social structure approached it mainly through questions of culture, making it "more controlled by the rules of good taste and good tone and thereby more intellectualised," while keeping remote "a whole set of realities at



once simple and scandalous.”<sup>200</sup> To engage with social structure and with the working class, French leftist intellectuals also had to rely on the mediation of the Stalinist PCF, which in the late 1940s enjoyed an unprecedented (and unrepeated) political success. Distrusted and treated as inferior by the party, these intellectuals still found purpose and belonging in their gestural engagement, mitigating their guilt about their relative privilege and about their contribution, as cultural producers, to the struggle (first against occupation, then for the proletariat).<sup>201</sup> This double bind made ‘authentic’ working-class cultural consumers barely detectible, unlike contemporary British accounts.

To some observers the very notion of authenticity seemed a naturalised fabrication, part of a web of myth spun by bourgeois hegemonic culture. In *Mythologies* (1957) Roland Barthes summed up several years of critique of popular culture with an essay arguing the pervasiveness and predominance of bourgeois myth. In fact, this myth was taken to be so unshakeable that the social strata oppressed by it, the working classes, were so debilitated by their complicity in it as to be a dubious source of potential revolt against it. Barthes’s view also fused with earlier leftist pessimism about intellectuals’ impotence and the futility of their public ‘commitment’. This pessimism about the prospects of resistance and the fixity of social structure was also reflected in a contemporary play, Jean Genet’s *Le Balcon* (first version in 1956), a reading of which along these lines will conclude this chapter.

### **‘Culture’ and ‘popular culture’**

Raymond Williams suggested that the “development of the idea of culture has, throughout, been a criticism of what has been called the bourgeois idea of society.”<sup>202</sup> Could this definition of culture, assuming an ‘organic’, bottom-upwards, locally particular identity, be applied to France of that time? After all,

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<sup>200</sup> Jean-Claude Passeron, “Introduction to the French Edition of *Uses of Literacy*,” trans. by Richard Dyer, *Working Papers in Cultural Studies* 1 (Spring 1971), 130.

<sup>201</sup> David Drake, *Intellectuals and Politics in Post-War France* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), 25, 40-44 (henceforth: Drake, *Intellectuals*).

<sup>202</sup> Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society: Coleridge to Orwell*, rev. edn (London: The Hogarth Press, 1987 [1958]), 328.

the ideological and class concerns that shaped Williams's understanding of 'culture' were not the main concerns of the French after the Second World War. Indeed, Brian Rigby, who traced the French postwar discourse on culture, notes that in France, 'Culture' means "a unified culture, whose values are permanent and universal" – that is, 'Culture' is a normative concept. However, Rigby also notes that many related terms suggest the emanation of Culture from the State and its institutions, or its restriction to a certain class or elite. Thus, the common definition of French Culture is informed by two elements: its permanent and universal character, taken to reflect the universal humanistic values of the Revolution; and its unified and local character, closely linked to other contested terms such as Nation and Homeland (*Patrie*).<sup>203</sup>

France's postwar reconstruction also involved the State's concerted effort to shape a national culture to replace local and regional customs. This also involved a cultivation of popular tastes, and was met both with enthusiasm and hostility on political, ideological, academic and personal grounds. This contestation politicised the understanding of culture more pervasively than in Britain, although, as in Britain, the distinction between ('high') Culture and 'popular culture' was roughly along the lines of social strata, making the definition of culture a question of *social* inclusion, legitimacy and relative value.<sup>204</sup> In interpreting culture, the French relied on universalistic notions like humanism to shape an inclusive definition of culture capable of accommodating Communists and Catholics, collaborators and *résistants*, Vichy-nationalists and Gaullists. This consensual picture of French national culture as a paradigmatic instance of humanist culture effectively contained divergent tendencies within the French political system until the late 1950s. While British representation of classes was through their cultures, French social structure was glossed over

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<sup>203</sup> Brian Rigby, *Popular Culture in Modern France: A Study of Cultural Discourse* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 5-7.

<sup>204</sup> The French cultural discourse goes back at least to the 1920s. The *Front Populaire* government of 1936 was the first to address popular pastimes. An earlier intellectual intervention was Jean Guéhenno's *Caliban parle* (1928) which, following Renan and against Benda, suggested that the common man ('Caliban') should partake in humanist culture.

efficiently, albeit provisionally, by the cardinal agreement on the “global alibi” of humanism.<sup>205</sup>

The two prevailing attitudes in late-1950s French intellectual discourse with regard to the working class were either a blatant, elitist intellectual condescension or a similarly patronising populism.<sup>206</sup> In his reconstruction of the discourse, Rigby suggests that three main groups participated in this debate on popular culture: unaffiliated or academic intellectuals; popular educators; and later, the Fifth Republic itself.

Setting the academic tone regarding popular culture was the sociologist Georges Friedmann, with his 1956 study *Le Travail en miettes*. Friedmann was a vocal supporter of the personal intellectual development of the working-class man in his leisure time.<sup>207</sup> By this he meant to counter not just the working man’s alienation from his work but also to improve his more common natural preferences for his leisure time, taking either aggressive or passive outlets. Friedmann suggested that an alternative ‘humanist education’, an education to Culture in the Western and French canons, would turn proletarian frustrations and wasted time into productive pastimes. On this point Friedmann was representative of a milieu of leftist French intellectuals, who saw the French working class as culturally wanting, deprived and frustrated by its elementary cultural activity, and needing improvement from outside.<sup>208</sup> Yet Rigby notes other examples suggesting other left-intellectual leanings, seeing the working class as morally superior and mystifying its cultures: Sartre’s lurch toward *La Cause du peuple*; some aspects of the Situationist movement, like Lebel’s condemnation of the Avignon Festival under Jean Vilar; and most clearly, the

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<sup>205</sup> Michael Kelly, “Humanism and National Unity: the Ideological Reconstruction of France,” in *The Culture of Reconstruction: European Literature, Thought and Film, 1945-50*, ed. by Nicholas Hewitt (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1989), 114-115.

<sup>206</sup> Intellectual condescension was sometimes unintended. In April 1953 Louis Aragon, the new editor of *Les Lettres françaises*, had to apologise for printing a less-than-iconic cover portrait of the recently deceased Stalin, disappointing his readership with Picasso’s more lyrical interpretation.

<sup>207</sup> Georges Friedmann, *Le Travail en miettes: spécialisation et loisirs* (Paris: Gallimard, 1956); the English translation was used here: Georges Friedmann, *The Anatomy of Work: The Implications of Specialization*, trans. by Wyatt Rawson (London: Heinemann, 1961).

<sup>208</sup> Rigby, 64.

rise of French Maoism in the late 1960s.<sup>209</sup> Some general sentiment of concern for the working class, for various reasons, was prevalent among French intellectuals in the 1950s and 1960s, yet it was not without opposition, as shown below.

This concern was shared by the self-appointed ‘cultural animators’ of the postwar French popular education movement, like Joffre Dumazedier and Benigno Caceres, co-founders of the leading association in that field, *Peuple et Culture*. Yet the popular educators were not motivated solely by cultural didacticism. Dumazedier, founding head of *Peuple et Culture*, tended to equate ‘culture’ with ‘leisure’, concluding that, since mass media transformed popular leisure, working class culture was effectively extinct, replaced by mass culture propagated to all.<sup>210</sup> Caceres, an autodidact, saw in his advance a universal lesson to all working-class people, and in himself an example of an ‘enlightened worker’.<sup>211</sup> Dumazedier and Caceres agreed on an *étatiste* consensus (reflecting a Third Republic mentality), holding that postwar cultural participation (*le partage culturel*) in wholesome leisure was a civic duty in aid of national reconstruction, showing solidarity with the modern, unified nation.<sup>212</sup> For a short while in the early Fourth Republic, until the PCF’s expulsion from Ramadier’s government in May 1947, this rhetoric of social mobilisation appealed to the political left. The elision between the two meanings of ‘*le peuple*’, as ‘nation’ and as ‘working class’, made it useful for pursuing, albeit provisionally, a leftist ideal of a just and equal society through all-national rhetoric.<sup>213</sup>

A third stance in the popular culture debate was that of the State itself. The empowered president of a new Fifth Republic, de Gaulle created by decree on 24 July 1959 a national Ministry for Cultural Affairs, appointing the author André Malraux as minister. One of the first initiatives of the new ministry was the creation of local and regional *Maisons de la Culture*, effectively taking over the pastoral role of voluntary associations like *Peuple et Culture*. The *Maisons de*

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<sup>209</sup> Rigby, 139-145.

<sup>210</sup> Rigby, 46-49.

<sup>211</sup> Rigby, 60-63.

<sup>212</sup> Rigby, 47, 59.

<sup>213</sup> Rigby, 59. This was the basis for the PCF’s self-promotion as “the incarnation of French national interest”; Drake, *Intellectuals*, 28.

*la Culture* were resonantly unsuccessful, not least for being remote and imposing state vehicles that intimidated their target audience or left it cold. The *Maisons* were also failed by Malraux's ambitious vision, which sought to bring 'the greatest culture to the greatest number of people.' Malraux believed culture to represent the finest examples of human endeavour and wished it to replace religion as a modern spiritual anchor.<sup>214</sup> The treasures of state-steered universal culture were meant to counter not just mass media but also local and regional customs, which Malraux considered not just provincial but cheap (*'une culture au rabais'*).<sup>215</sup> Only much later, in the wake of the May 1968 *événements*, and under some pressure, were the severe policy and execution flaws acknowledged by the heads of the *Maisons*.

The policies of Malraux's ministry, like the opinions of Friedmann and the popular educators, reflected attempts to impose canonical culture on 'the masses' instead of mass culture. This general attitude toward the 'working-class predicament' in the cultural debate provoked the anger and frustration of the socialist radical Daniel Mothé (pseudonym of Jacques Gautrat), who criticised it in the review *Socialisme ou barbarie*.<sup>216</sup> Mothé, like Friedmann, thought that workers were alienated by their labour and could use some constructive outlet. However, he thought the popular education movement caused workers to be doubly alienated, from work *and* from their class. Cultural education promised workers tools for social mobility but delivered none: instead, popular educators provided cultural commodities, status symbols that were devalued like 'positional goods' elsewhere. This to Mothé was *la culture parcellaire* (echoing Friedmann's *travail parcellaire*), which he saw as being perpetuated by Friedmann's 'Fordism' and by the popular educators' 'Stakhanovism'. Instead, Mothé held that culture is not a normative concept and so should not be manipulated: his term '*culture vivante*', lived culture as the only culture there is,

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<sup>214</sup> Rigby, 133. This is clearly analogous to the Arnold-Leavis culture in Britain.

<sup>215</sup> Rigby, 134.

<sup>216</sup> Daniel Mothé, "Les ouvriers et la culture," *Socialisme ou barbarie* 30 (April-May 1960), 1-44. As a machine operator at the Renault factories, Mothé/Gautrat was immersed in working-class culture and produced several chronicles and theoretical critiques of working life and syndicalism.

suggested a similar and near-contemporary understanding to that of Williams, albeit not in his wake.<sup>217</sup>

Mothé's position is a useful pivot between Friedmann's earlier social analysis and some later assertions Mothé foreshadowed, made by Bourdieu in the 1960s and 1970s, concerning the complicit role of the popular culture movement and of the working class in perpetuating the class system.<sup>218</sup> Bourdieu saw the working class as an essentially barbaric opposite of culture, not socially dominant but still a point of reference, a foil, for other classes. To Bourdieu, culture was never democratised: state schools failed to compensate for social inequalities and create working-class 'cultural goodwill' (*bonne volonté culturelle*); popular educators projected their own experience onto the working class, seeing in cultural salvation (*salut culturel*) the only route of social ascent; and the mass media never homogenised the culture they relayed. The working-class ethos or 'habitus' were shaped by their material conditions, but their making a virtue of necessity should not be seen as submission. To Bourdieu, 'popular culture' was not a culture of resistance (as it was to Mothé, and as 'subcultures' were later to British cultural studies) but of deprivation, and its objective flaws made it no fitting alternative to universal, national culture. Bourdieu's elitist pessimism was based on what he saw as scientific grounds, but its negative determinism made it contested. His view that the working class was passive (but should not be blamed for it) and victimised (by other classes, including the middle-class intellectuals) was being resisted, as Rigby suggests, because it was untimely after May 1968, in a new period of politicisation and renewed populism.<sup>219</sup>

The discourse on 'Culture' and 'popular culture' collects together some French attitudes toward class, particularly the working class, from sociological or educational perspectives. Rigby's reconstruction of it is invaluable for the unique juxtapositions it makes, although it sometimes 'anachronistically' arranges

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<sup>217</sup> Rigby, 70-78.

<sup>218</sup> Most of Bourdieu's major work is beyond the scope of this thesis, but he helps to historically contextualise the cultural debate. Unlike Mothé, Bourdieu was also an empirical social researcher of various socio-cultural issues (academics, art galleries, heritage and fashion).

<sup>219</sup> Rigby, 119-122, 130.

discussions thematically rather than chronologically.<sup>220</sup> It nevertheless compensates for the political slant most French studies take, confining themselves to Fourth or Fifth Republic discussions of intellectual life. Rigby's study uniquely isolates the discussion of 'culture' versus 'popular culture', whereas most studies of French postwar cultural history, especially ones focusing on intellectuals, converge around common themes like *engagement*, communism, colonialism and the 1968 *événements*. Rigby's reconstructed cultural debate helps question the major-scale narrative of overtly politicised French intellectual action, and to challenge the minor status of class as a social issue in postwar French public and intellectual discourses. As recent election campaigns suggest, social structure remains a touchy issue in France: particularly in the postwar years the persistence of working-class culture could be seen as a failure of French *dirigisme*, modernisation and centralisation.

The French postwar discourse on culture is pessimistic in several respects. The very need to define or redefine 'culture' is an implicit admission of an already eroded sense of what 'culture' really is. The discourse on culture (and its reconstruction) is a problematisation of culture, an attempt to solve a problem, a real situation. It suggests that the need to redefine culture after war and occupation arose from the erosion of the French cultural canon and of French collective identity as social definition. This need was partly grounded in attempts to centralise French culture and make it a truly national culture. Cultural redefinition was also informed by the ostensibly democratising element of expanding commercial mass culture, threatening not only the cultural elites and their tastes but the very French-groundedness of French culture. There is also, as Susan Weiner acknowledges, the conscious construction throughout the 1950s of the '*exception française*', the reassertion of "a transhistorical and indeed exceptional 'Frenchness'."<sup>221</sup> That effort was assisted by the Gaullist formulation categorically pitting 'eternal' France against a Vichy 'episode'. Politically the

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<sup>220</sup> In 1991 Rigby discussed only two books dealing with the cultural debate in postwar France with any considerable breadth of scope: Pierre Cabanne's impressionistic *Le Pouvoir Culturel sous la Vème République* (1981), and Evelyne Ritaine's polemic *Les Stratèges de la culture* (1983).

<sup>221</sup> Susan Weiner, "Editor's Preface", *Yale French Studies* 98, *The French Fifties*, ed. by Susan Weiner, (2000), 2.

need for redefinition was driven by the double catastrophes of occupation and collaboration, and by a need to deal with the continuity of the implicated French public in a newly reinvented, forward-looking nation. The solution to that problem involved introducing the principle of universalist humanism into the united French culture, absolving betrayal as an error of judgment born of weakness and human fallibility.<sup>222</sup> Albeit defensive and provisional, that solution was long-lasting and was only challenged critically in the late 1960s.

Some of the stances presented in the culture discourse were themselves pessimistic. Mothé and Bourdieu share a kind of pessimism in their views on the working-class predicament as a state of ongoing exploitation, alienation and deprivation, with both frowning on attempts at popular education (by voluntary associations or *Maisons de la culture*) as perpetuating working-class deprivation and alienation. In fact, the alternative solutions each offers to this situation are rather far-fetched in that they aim radically to transform fundamental elements of social reality. Mothé trusted in the revolutionary potential of the working class and its cultural resistance to constructed national unification. This element is absent from Bourdieu's pessimist approach, seeing working-class 'barbarism' as born of both material deprivation and cultural bias and therefore destined to remain subordinate and beyond amelioration, at least without a radical social reorganisation. Both Mothé and Bourdieu, then, do not see a constructive solution in a transformative political action, or, for that matter, in any way within the current social order.

## Demystification of Life

### *Barthes and Mythologies*

In discussing cultural pessimism in postwar France, one cannot overlook the figure of Roland Barthes, which reflected and sometimes inspired other opinions in the broader field of cultural critique. The sentiment of responsibility and concern evoked by Sartre in *Les Temps Modernes* and later in *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (see below) was not lost on Barthes, who in 1949 settled in Paris

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<sup>222</sup> For a detailed account of those attempts see Kelly, "Humanism and National Unity," 103-119.



after a decade of roaming Europe and the Middle East, studying and teaching intermittently, when not nursing bouts of tuberculosis. He also became acquainted with the Structuralist anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss, which saw meaning as ultimately derived from culture, that is, from the ideational aspect of the social system. Lévi-Strauss also stressed interdisciplinary methodology (premised on the unification of the *sciences humaines*) and the belief in the primacy of society and its unconscious rules over the conscious action of social subjects.<sup>223</sup> Barthes made his start in committed literary criticism with a series of articles in *Combat*, subsequently published together as *Le Degré Zéro de l'écriture* (1953). In this book he linked Marxism to literature and commitment, positing the term *écriture*, being the correspondence of form to content, as the uniquely creative element of literature, which is otherwise encumbered, through language, style and reference (the world), by values and meanings imprinted in it, as writers struggle to make it their tool of subjective expression.<sup>224</sup>

Yet the vanguard of French literature increasingly showed Barthes writers treating their art as craftsmanship. Barthes admired the old bourgeoisie of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as the original progressive class responsible for revolution and toppling the *ancien régime*, and revered its literary high realism. As the bourgeoisie usurped its revolutionary role following 1830, their literary realism was degraded in later nineteenth-century naturalism, which Barthes saw as the precursor to the popular culture of his day, the uniform

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<sup>223</sup> In 1950, one year after publishing his *Elementary Structures of Kinship*, Lévi-Strauss introduced the first book-form selection (preceded only by course notes co-edited by Michel Leiris) of works by Marcel Mauss, his predecessor as chair of the fifth section of the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes. In this famous and influential introduction Lévi-Strauss not only presented Mauss as a 'failed' (proto-)Structuralist, but concisely presented the foundational principles of Structuralism. See: Marcel Mauss, *Sociologie et Anthropologie, précédé d'une introduction à l'œuvre de Marcel Mauss par Claude Lévi-Strauss* (Paris: Presses Universitaires Françaises, 1950); Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss*, trans. by Felicity Baker (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987).

<sup>224</sup> Systematic studies consulted about Barthes's life and work: Louis-Jean Calvet, *Roland Barthes: A Biography*, trans. by Sarah Wykes (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994 [1990]); Michael Moriarty, *Roland Barthes* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991); Annette Lavers, *Roland Barthes: Structuralism and After* (London: Methuen, 1982).

twentieth-century petty-bourgeois myth, a mere parody of old bourgeois realism. Thus Barthes saw petty-bourgeois culture as a degradation and reduction of literary forms, as politically conservative and even as infecting the social realism of Marxist writing.<sup>225</sup> This dim view of hegemonic culture illuminates Barthes's understanding of the distinction between Culture (in the old bourgeois sense) and popular culture (the petty-bourgeois) and served as a thematic link to his following book.

In *Mythologies* (1957), Barthes elaborated on his consideration of the value-ladenness and implication of language and of writing (as signifying practices) by their historical conditions. The book presented a previously published (1954-56) series of short analyses, or *petites mythologies*, of everyday phenomena and objects, most of them part of the new reality of consumerism and mass communications – films, advertisements, cars, food and drink. In each analysis Barthes proceeded from the object or phenomenon, explored as a system of signs, trying to find the structure common to those signs, indicating the object's 'deeper' semiological reference.<sup>226</sup> In the process, he suggested ways in which ideological abuse or a 'theft of language' have hijacked the meaning or function of the object of enquiry, turning it into a vehicle of bourgeois hegemony. *Mythologies* concluded with a theoretical essay, "Myth Today", in which Barthes elaborated on the systemic predominance and ubiquity of myth in culture, noting the bleak prospects for subverting or overcoming this domination. Despite this theoretical essay and its pessimistic tone, and probably due to its otherwise accessible content – as suggested in its prologue, demystification is not an Olympian undertaking – *Mythologies* was a huge commercial success, introducing Barthes to a wider, non-academic readership and making him into something of a celebrity.

*Mythologies* can be read as Barthes's take on the Sartrean maxim of commitment, with the project of 'demystification' or unmasking at the core of their respective projects. Steven Ungar suggests Barthes subscribed to the

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<sup>225</sup> Lavers, 61, 76-78; Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968 [1953]), 55-73.

<sup>226</sup> In some critiques, like that of Abbé Pierre's haircut, Barthes went beyond its iconography to discuss how it triggered complacent praise of (Abbé Pierre's) charity, whilst simultaneously obviating the need to formulate concrete, structural responses to socioeconomic injustice.

committed agenda by denouncing “attitudes toward sexuality, race, and national identity grounded in conventions of *le bon sens* and the natural that he took to be skewed and tendentious.”<sup>227</sup> Yet while Sartre’s existentialist ethics concentrated on issues of human agency like injustice and accountability, Barthes, then a proto-Structuralist, was mainly interested in the ‘big picture’ of the system of signs, and was also aesthetically fascinated by his objects of scrutiny. Ungar also places *Mythologies* within a wider critique of capitalism going back to Marx and Engels’ *The German Ideology*, through the study of mythology, on to Barthes’s ongoing dialogue with Henri Lefebvre on mystification, and yet further forward to Guy Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle*; Barthes’s import here was in establishing a Structuralist connection between capitalism and national ideology.<sup>228</sup> It should be clear, though, that neither Sartre nor Lefebvre accepted the Structuralist approach: in fact, they regarded it as a model of enquiry complicit, as Lefebvre saw it, with “capitalist alienation and bourgeois rationality.”<sup>229</sup> Barthes nevertheless saw himself as a leftist, however unconventional, and his understanding of myth as metalanguage, stealthily shaping the perception of self and experience, foreshadowed some more radical and ideological Marxist cultural critiques.<sup>230</sup>

In *Mythologies* Barthes makes a strongly worded attack on the effects of consumerism as an interpellative mechanism in popular culture; and still, there is room too for two outstanding ambiguities in his position. Firstly, if, as he claims in “Myth Today”, the depoliticising power of bourgeois myth is so strong, inherently stronger than that of Leftist myths, then this implies that bourgeois hegemony is total and that the Left can only fail. The very existence of myths on

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<sup>227</sup> Steven Ungar, “From Event to Memory Site: Thoughts on Rereading *Mythologies*,” in *Roland Barthes*, ed. by Mike Gane and Nicholas Gane, vol. II (London: Sage, 2004), 101.

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>229</sup> Rick Rylance, *Roland Barthes* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), 55.

<sup>230</sup> Barthes’s take on myth is similar to Louis Althusser’s later concept of interpellation, referring to the mechanism producing social subjects so they can only conceive of themselves in terms of the dominant ideology. Moriarty adds to this the omnipresent nature of both myth and interpellation, and the way both imply recognition of bourgeois representations as facts of Nature. However, Barthes (unlike Althusser) regarded individuals as secondary to his largely systemic outlook. Michael Moriarty, “Barthes: Ideology, Culture, Subjectivity,” in *Roland Barthes*, ed. by Mike Gane and Nicholas Gane, vol. II (London: Sage, 2004), 68.

the Left means it is depoliticised, barring a necessary trait of revolutionary speech and action, which are all politicised. Corruption lurks for the Left wherever it may turn, except for two directions: the utopian prospect of a successful revolution, restoring real speech and eradicating myth – or the futureless possibility of being and remaining powerless, as the speech of the oppressed is too barren to sustain possible lies and mystification on their part.<sup>231</sup> It seems unclear whether hope for a revolution is not hollowed out by the respective natures of bourgeois and Leftist myths. Thus, Barthes's clear support of dissent (or at least resistance) seems irreconcilable with his dismissal of it as useless.

A second ambiguity to Barthes's position in *Mythologies* has to do with his own attitude toward the project, which seems at once pessimistic and near-deterministic, and confident and excited about the Structuralist and semiological tools and methods.<sup>232</sup> These two ends of Barthes's approach might be mediated by taking his conception of the mythologist and, implicitly, of himself, with relation to culture. Barthes expected the mythologist to be completely alienated and excluded from culture so he can retain his critical detachment and not be tainted by the culture of myth. The mythologist's work, his critical, demystifying speech, is a metalanguage, and his realm of reflexive behaviour is (and should be) apart from the realm of action and production; he 'acts' nothing. This is consistent with Barthes's ambivalence regarding the simultaneous futility and validity of dissent. It also reveals some of his non-conformist temperament and his disdain for political activism, viewing "society itself as inevitably injurious to individual integrity."<sup>233</sup> Barthes's view of working-class popular culture was also condescending, and he famously described their speech, the language of the oppressed, as 'poor, monotonous and immediate', as not only not political but not even mythically depoliticised, rendering them unable to develop. This fits well with the patronising social concern typical of the French academic discourse on culture in his day – but less so with his British contemporary Raymond Williams.

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<sup>231</sup> See Moriarty, "Barthes," 71.

<sup>232</sup> Rylance, 54.

<sup>233</sup> Rylance, 59. Barthes carefully cultivated his non-conformism, fearing entrapment even by his own choices, so "this way of distancing himself is a common feature of his life"; Calvet, 127.

Williams and Barthes, though ignorant of each other's work at the time, have much in common. They are both of the same generation (Barthes was six years Williams' senior); each understood literature in social terms, although for different reasons; both were influenced by Marxism to varying degrees; both were interested in popular communications and their relations with art; and both started their writing careers in the context of postwar reconstruction, in a way reacting to it and to the cultural changes it ushered in. Nevertheless the two also clearly diverge in outlooks. Barthes viewed 'the oppressed' (a term he uses fairly indiscriminately, to coincide with his vague and dim view of them) as a hapless, ignorant and stunted lot for failing to realise their comprehensive exploitation in a culture shaped by the hegemonic petty-bourgeois class (again, itself a farcical imitation of the old grand bourgeoisie);<sup>234</sup> whereas Williams saw that understanding of 'mass culture' as itself complicit with the bourgeois view, in that the notion of a universally trash-fed social multitude as a receptive audience clearly facilitates seeing them as a 'mass market', to be addressed through 'mass communications', themselves to be studied by the likes of Barthes as 'mass culture'.<sup>235</sup> Williams's view of culture is, as noted above, inclusive and descriptive, and resents the self-exile of the precious few from a public sphere dominated by those they have dubbed 'the masses'.<sup>236</sup> His notion of culture is optimistic and dynamic, stressing its constantly constructed character. Yet for Barthes, contemporary culture is a static eschatology, where all one can expect of the future is the apocalypse of the present, itself so negative it overshadows all prospective positive development.<sup>237</sup>

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<sup>234</sup> Lavers suggests that "Barthes already found the proletariat *embourgeoisé*," and thus obscurely aware, like the petty bourgeoisie itself, of its own subjugation – therefore pinning their hopes (like Arthur Seaton *and* his father) on conformism and luck; Lavers, 79, 81-82.

<sup>235</sup> Moriarty, "Barthes," 67. Leavis had held the view of 'mass culture' as passive receptors of bourgeois trash. Williams would have none of it, and reserved special vitriol for the very term 'mass', as in Williams, 299-300.

<sup>236</sup> Rylance, 56-58. He relies on Williams' essay "Culture is Ordinary", criticising the "new dissenters", not having Barthes in mind, "but it might have done." This fundamental point of Williams's also appears in the last part of the earlier *Culture and Society*, and throughout the later *Keywords*.

<sup>237</sup> Cf. Lavers, 69.

Although the impression of the changing meanings of the concept of culture was already clear in *Culture and Society*, it was not until the 1970s and his *Keywords* (1976) that Williams attempted a broader, term-by-term analysis of the ideological investment of language and vocabulary – a project comparable with Barthes's mythologies. A new edition of *Mythologies* was first translated into English only in 1972, roughly coinciding with another contemporary of *Mythologies*, Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy*. The following spring, the French introduction by its co-translator, Jean-Claude Passeron, was translated back into English, relaying the sense with which Hoggart was received into the French intellectual discourse.<sup>238</sup> Hoggart's approach was mostly taken as novel, and Passeron could not place it in the European tradition of class sociology or anthropology, partly because it was doubled (or split) – a participating observer retaining his intellectual critical outlook without the characteristic intellectual elitism.<sup>239</sup> Concomitantly, Passeron found in Hoggart a refreshing absence of militant populism which he had come to expect from Left-wing intellectuals, certainly in the late 1960s.<sup>240</sup> Preoccupied with the position and function of intellectuals in society and regarding the working class, Passeron had special interest in the autobiographical process of becoming that Hoggart suggested: how a working-class boy transcends his background to become an intellectual, yet seems prepared to question himself and re-examine his background from his new intellectual vantage point.<sup>241</sup>

This aspect of Hoggart's work, so novel to Passeron and the French in 1970, had been by then in British currency for over a decade and was considered old hat in both its argument and style. Likewise, the novelty and impressive systematic outlook Barthes's *Mythologies* held for British readership owed much

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<sup>238</sup> Richard Hoggart, *La Culture du pauvre. Etude sur le style de vie des classes populaires en Angleterre*, trans. by Françoise and Jean-Claude Garcias and Jean-Claude Passeron, intro. by Jean-Claude Passeron (Paris: Minuit, 1970).

<sup>239</sup> Rylance, 64. Passeron presented Hoggart as an ethnological innovator of a daring kind improbable in France, and so all the more instructive; Passeron, 120, 125, 127, 130.

<sup>240</sup> Brian Rigby, 'Popular Culture' in *France and England: The French Translation of Richard Hoggart's The Uses of Literacy* (Hull: University of Hull Press, 1996), 12.

<sup>241</sup> Rigby, 'Popular Culture' in *France and England*, 8, 10.

to the relative newness of Structuralism to the Anglophone academic world.<sup>242</sup> While Structuralism had had an extensive and lasting influence on the very shape of the French conception of knowledge, not to mention the modes of its scientific enquiry, the turning point in its introduction to Britain and the United States was around the 1967 Johns Hopkins University conference on *The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*. By then, Barthes was moving away from Structuralism and tried to disavow some of the opinions expressed in *Mythologies*, though not its general tone of pessimism about bourgeois cultural hegemony over the masses. Barthes shares this pessimism with Hoggart who, while neither populist nor elitist regarding the working class, was still not sympathetic to their newly-acquired consumerism. Like *Mythologies*, *The Uses of Literacy* is a text split between the affectionate, personal tenor of the descriptions of the Leeds of Hoggart's youth, and the scathing scorn for the affluent working-class of the 1950s.

Perhaps this is also a matter of intellectual tradition, here being the Arnold-Leavis tradition of moral concern for the corrupting powers of industrialised capitalism, in which "modern, industrial history is understood as tragedy, and twentieth-century consumer culture is the latest and most pernicious form of the resulting anarchy of values."<sup>243</sup> This moralising, traditional basis of Hoggart's views is not shared by Barthes, who is more present-oriented and genuinely fascinated with modern life, which might explain his popularity with a younger readership. Yet apart from these differences, Barthes's and Hoggart's themes are rather similar: the nostalgic sense of a more integral bygone age and a related pessimism about the present state of culture, which seems to perpetuate itself and linger on with diminishing prospects of being overturned; the withering away of personal agency and cultural memory; and the disdain for increasing predominance of American-style rampant consumerism.<sup>244</sup> This is also an example of an interesting characteristic of cultural pessimism: despite quite divergent premises and modes of reasoning, critics arrive at the same pessimistic conclusions.

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<sup>242</sup> Rylance, 64.

<sup>243</sup> Rylance, 61.

<sup>244</sup> Rylance, 62.

### *The Everyday and Its Observers*

The discourse on ‘Culture’ and ‘popular culture’, as traced by Brian Rigby, was offered here as the French counterpart to British cultural studies, with the two linked through assertions of ‘culture’ as a critical term. Yet while the French deliberation of culture was clearly a discourse, it could not be said to have formed anything like an academic discipline. For that, the French correlative to British cultural studies is the discourse on everyday life, or *le quotidien*. Because of the key function of material and cultural consumption – as a social interaction, a ‘deep’ signifying activity – the processes of French modernisation and British affluence were felt in factories and highways but also in kitchens and sitting rooms. By the late 1950s this made every French and British citizen an informed stakeholder in the processes of modernisation and ‘Americanisation’, which touched on everyday life and its pace of transformation.

There are some striking similarities between the discourse of British cultural studies and the French discourse of everyday life. Both were rooted in Marxism and its revisionist theorisation: Williams combined a revision of the Marxist base-superstructure model with culture-based English studies; Lefebvre’s interwar work included treatments of Hegel and Marx and a theorisation of dialectical materialism. Both discourses also had unusual origins: Williams was a literary scholar in a field expanded both by a critical tradition going back to Richards, Eliot and Leavis, and by institutional changes in postwar English university departments (see chapter 3); Lefebvre was a philosopher whose extra-Marxist concerns included Schopenhauer, Sartre and Gide. Both ended up performing a kind of heavily theorised ‘domestic ethnography’, highlighting everyday life as a field worthy of critical analysis, remaining outside traditional disciplinary divisions but as ongoing *interdisciplinary* discourses. Neither discourse was established primarily as an academic discipline (although cultural studies departments do now exist), and this was due in part to their explicitly politicised nature as critical discourses with leftist transformative agendas, committed to linking theory and praxis. Perhaps most importantly, from our perspective, both British cultural studies and the French discourse of the everyday were distinctly of their time, distinctly postwar: while Lefebvre had worked on mystification (with Norbert Guterman) and alienation before the



Second World War, his interest in the everyday was famously sparked afterwards, by his wife's remark on their washing powder; in Britain, Hoggart's *Uses of Literacy* reflected the social fissure between interwar and postwar working-class lives and expectations.<sup>245</sup>

Michael Sheringham suggests two important dates in the history of theorising the everyday in postwar France that frame its initial period of introduction and dissemination: 1947, when Lefebvre's first volume of *Critique de la vie quotidienne* was published, and 1960, the year of the publication of its second volume.<sup>246</sup> During this period the exploration of everyday life was also undertaken by Maurice Blanchot, in the field of linguistic usage ("Everyday Speech"), and as we have seen by Roland Barthes.<sup>247</sup> Lefebvre himself formulated the everyday not as a new system, but as a link between existing systems: "Common denominator of activities, locus and milieu of human functions, the everyday can also be analysed as the uniform aspect of the major sectors of social life: work, family, private life, leisure."<sup>248</sup> Women, the working class and youths bear in their everyday lives the brunt of what we know as modernity, otherwise apparent through images, the cinema and television, our diversions from everydayness.<sup>249</sup> Lefebvre thought the everyday was an ambiguous category, reflecting the mixture of freedom and inevitability, breach and continuity of the immediate postwar French experience. Rather than being defined negatively, as the residue of 'Culture', the everyday was a complex concept: it comprised (with modernity itself) the deep structure of contemporary life, typically an urban, bourgeois, *prosaic* life that had lost its aura of unity, stability, and continuity.<sup>250</sup> The everyday was the point of insertion of

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<sup>245</sup> Ross makes much of Lefebvre's anecdote in Ross, *Fast Cars*, 58; and Ross, "French Quotidian," 19.

<sup>246</sup> Michael Sheringham, *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 5.

<sup>247</sup> On the exchange between Barthes and Lefebvre see: Michael Kelly, "Demystification: A Dialogue between Barthes and Lefebvre," *Yale French Studies* 98: *The French Fifties*, ed. Susan Weiner (2000), 79-97.

<sup>248</sup> Henri Lefebvre, "Everyday and Everydayness," trans. Christine Levich, *Yale French Studies* 73: *Everyday Life*, eds. Alice Kaplan and Kristin Ross (1987), 10.

<sup>249</sup> Lefebvre, "Everyday and Everydayness," 10-11.

<sup>250</sup> Lefebvre, "Everyday and Everydayness," 11; Ross, "French Quotidian," 20-21.

‘Americanism’ into French lives as the paradigm of modernisation, and this deep structural penetration explains its importance. Most importantly, Lefebvre’s everyday was potentially a critical and transformative concept: observing the everyday was already critical action, questioning the images and spectacles of modernity that obscure it; as the all-but-gone, impoverished, prosaic trace of a former auratic plenitude, it contained the secret of its own potential transformation.

The critique of the everyday gains in importance when viewed through its 1950s historical context, standing as an alternative take on the kind of generalising, abstracting outlook characteristic of ascendant Structuralism. Yet Structuralism itself was merely a symptom, enabling the ‘colonization of everyday life’ and complementing it by what Sheringham calls “the de-realizing spell of modernization.”<sup>251</sup> ‘Objective’ Structuralist rules, codes and structures effaced the obsolete terms of bourgeois humanism, “subjectivity, consciousness and agency – what passed for *l’homme*,” enabling the eventual discourse of the ‘death of man’.<sup>252</sup> Ross notes that while ‘man’ was dying at the hands of Structuralism he was never more alive than with Algerian and other anti-colonial freedom fighters reasserting their human rights, shaking off the qualifying, animalising, colonialism of their Western oppressors, in their struggle for recognition as human beings.<sup>253</sup> To Ross, a similar ‘de-realisation’ characterised historical accounts typical of the *Annales* school: the *longue durée* displaced causal agency, made individual action look trivial, and divorced historical

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<sup>251</sup> Sheringham, 11.

<sup>252</sup> Ross, *Fast Cars*, 161; see also above in the introduction.

<sup>253</sup> Ross, *Fast Cars*, 163-164. This is a resonant point, but the general picture was more complex. Despite its critical aspirations, French ethnology was constrained by colonialism and its conservative political and ideological underpinnings: it was effectively a *science coloniale*. Yet, as a traditionally left-leaning, liberal, ‘culturalist’ discipline, with its foundations in the work of Durkheim, Lévy-Bruhl and Mauss, French ethnology had the potential to mediate and advocate for the causes of colonised peoples. This line was represented by the review *Présence Africaine*, established in 1947, and by the outspoken advocacy of Michel Leiris: cf. Michel Leiris, “L’Ethnologue devant le colonialisme,” *Les Temps modernes* 58 (1950), 357-374; Michel Leiris, *Race et civilisation* (Paris: Gallimard/UNESCO, 1951). Jean Jamin, “L’Anthropologie et ses acteurs,” in *Les Enjeux philosophiques des années 50*, ed. by Christian Descamps (Paris : Editions du Centre Pompidou, 1989), 99-114.

memory from concrete events. Both *Annales* historiography and Structuralist social science thus reflect an ideology of capitalist modernisation seeking “to undermine eventfulness by masking social contradictions that engender events.”<sup>254</sup>

These ‘de-realising’ tendencies enjoyed continued predominance in France throughout the 1950s. Structuralism and the *sciences humaines* were challenged at the time, both by the older generation of intellectuals (Sartre in *Critique de la raison dialectique*, 1960) and by younger intellectuals, introducing new methods of analysis (Foucault’s *Histoire de la folie*, 1961). Nevertheless, French philosophical culture reasserted itself against these various epistemological transformations: the philosophy of subject and experience and the philosophy of concept and knowledge were the same two archetypal forms of intellectual engagement as in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>255</sup> The reflection on the everyday was nevertheless boosted institutionally in 1960: Lefebvre set up a centre for the study of everyday life with a regular research seminar; and Barthes assumed a new post at the sixth section of the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes (EPHE), where his first seminar addressed modern signifying processes.<sup>256</sup> Thus work on the everyday was disseminated to new generations of students, prepared to challenge the everyday by breaking it down to its constituent elements of signification. This should, however, be considered against a background of the institutionalisation of the *sciences humaines* at this time, owing in part to indirect American intervention, assisting institutions oriented toward the ‘modernised’ social sciences: ENA, while a wholly French enterprise, was modelled on American business schools; the sixth section of the EPHE had been established in 1947, originally as a base for the *Annalistes* (headed first by Febvre, then by Braudel), by a donation from the Rockefeller Foundation; and four years of lobbying by Braudel resulted in 1959 in the Maison des Sciences de l’Homme, funded by the American Ford Foundation.<sup>257</sup> In fact, as in Britain, history and the social sciences soon eclipsed philosophy in institutional prominence.

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<sup>254</sup> Ross, *Fast Cars*, 190.

<sup>255</sup> Jean-Louis Fabiani, “Sociologie et histoire des idées: L’épistémologie et les sciences sociales,” in Descamps (ed.), 115, 118.

<sup>256</sup> Sheringham, 5.

<sup>257</sup> Ross, *Fast Cars*, 185-187; Fabiani, 121.

Lefebvre's concern was not just about the 'de-realising spell of modernisation' in theoretical thought: unlike the Barthes of the 1950s, he reacted to the 'de-realisation' that seemed to be happening in literature and cinema. The male *nouveaux romanciers* (see chapter 4) produced fiction that exploited the human *regard* to create narratives which would view everything through its 'there-ness' first, through its being an object. In that they believed they were creating a literature of production as a way of being in the world, countering Barthesian bourgeois myth (where nothing is produced) and its prefabricated styles that can only be consumed and aped.<sup>258</sup> Likewise, the filmmakers of the *nouvelle vague* sought to purge the cinematic text of the utter functional meaningfulness and taut narrative surfaces familiar from classic Hollywood cinema: instead they offered a stylised 'meaninglessness' in some ways linked to the authentic everyday. Precisely because 'nothing happens' in the 'superficiality of existence' of the modern everyday, the films attempted to foreground the minute actions of real people in the real world in all their relative minuteness and personal momentousness.<sup>259</sup> Like the *nouveaux romanciers*, filmmakers such as Truffaut and Godard were still making films about reality, but they rejected what they saw as the facile conventions of traditional realist representation.

### *An intellectual pessimism*

Barthes's pessimistic impasse, epitomised by the position of the mythologist, was not the initial mindset among intellectuals of the French left. Since Liberation, Sartre had been most influential in advocating commitment (*engagement*), not least through his newly-founded journal *Les Temps Modernes* (henceforth *TM*). Sartre's October 1945 inaugural manifesto for *TM* introduced a maxim of immediacy and timeliness, a *carpe diem*, compelling committed writers to live up to their readers' trust and respond to and act upon their own time.<sup>260</sup> This was

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<sup>258</sup> Ross, *Fast Cars*, 75-76, 183. Ross takes particular note of Robbe-Grillet's phrase '*le pouvoir laveur du regard*' (the cleansing power of the gaze) in her discussion of the new French stress on hygiene.

<sup>259</sup> Peter Brunette, "But Nothing Happened: The Everyday in French Postwar Cinema," in Gumpert (ed.), 79-81.

<sup>260</sup> Mehlman mentions the Horatian maxim in his short introduction to Sartre's translated manifesto in *Postwar French Thought vol. II: Literary Debate, Texts and Contexts*, ed. by

not simply a change of tack for Sartre, from more metaphysical and aesthetic interests to more social and political ones – but also a direct opposition to the predominant interwar intellectual agenda as put forward in *La Trahison des clercs* (1927), where Julien Benda had attacked *hommes de lettres* for neglecting detached, universal contemplation to intervene in current affairs. Sartre reframed the immediate postwar situation in terms of freedom and responsibility: ‘getting one’s hands dirty’ was not to become ‘contaminated’, as Benda had thought. Commitment was rooted historically in the wartime experience and as a literary maxim it fashioned a more inclusive committed realism than social realism commonly understood.<sup>261</sup> *TM*’s commitment to the working class was nevertheless apparent in its intended role as platform for *témoignage* (witness documents) of working-class lives, taken as meaningful in and of themselves by Sartre and Michel Leiris. *TM* advocated ‘synthetic anthropology’ as an alternative to the growing influence of Structuralism in academic anthropology: meaning, insisted Sartre and Leiris, was still generated by individual freedom, even within the confines of the social situation.<sup>262</sup>

In its early years *TM* was not alone in advocating a European exceptionalism that shunned both sides of the ‘dehumanising’ East-West bloc politics: communist totalitarianism and Western imperialism. European exceptionalism designated the continent as a neutral region with the moral core of social democracy and the new role of liberalising the world by example. Politically, this meant an intellectual search for neutralism and ‘third ways’ such as progressive Catholicism and existentialism.<sup>263</sup> The Kravchenko and Rousset affairs served unaffiliated leftist intellectuals as proof of the oppressive power of

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Denis Hollier and Jeffrey Mehlman (New York: The New Press, 1999), 29; see also Drake, *Intellectuals*, 26. For his later, more thorough qualification of commitment see Jean-Paul Sartre, *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948).

<sup>261</sup> Howard Davies, *Sartre and ‘Les Temps Modernes’* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 25.

<sup>262</sup> Davies, 80.

<sup>263</sup> Discussing the ‘battle of ideas’ between existentialism, Catholic personalism and Marxism, Kelly shows how each tried repeatedly to grapple with ideas and positions of others, and to assimilate some ideas into their own programmes (in particular, Mounier’s *Esprit* circle). Michael Kelly, *The Cultural and Intellectual Rebuilding of France after the Second World War* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), cf. 158-159, 167-168, 170-172.

communism, not just in France through PCF organs, but also internationally, several years before Khrushchev's XXth party congress speech.<sup>264</sup> A significant attempt at third-way political mobilisation was the formation of the Rassemblement Démocratique Révolutionnaire (RDR), a short-lived experiment (1948-49) in extra-partisan politics that grouped anti-fascists like Rousset, Catholic humanists like Mounier and Sartre himself.<sup>265</sup> Sartre nevertheless went on to become a communist fellow-traveller, if only from 1952 until the Soviet intervention in Hungary in late 1956. This drove him and many others worldwide to overt criticism of Soviet communism, and led to a widespread disillusionment among the French intellectual left with their political representation through PCF and SFIO (which, in coalition, was complicit in both Suez and Algeria). As in Britain, this disillusionment was channelled toward hopes for a 'new left'-type movement.<sup>266</sup> Moreover, the Hungarian invasion raised questions about the impact and validity of intellectual action.

By the mid-1950s French leftist intellectuals were pessimistic about the possibility of transformative action and the widespread withdrawal from politics. As French society and its political map changed, they lost faith in their transformative potential as public leaders, or, indeed, about the influence of any single individual as political agent. As the exercise of State power became increasingly authoritarian, that widespread pessimism infected the eroding trust in cultural production as a political and social vehicle. With the waning of French international influence, it also seemed justifiable to be pessimistic about France's national role (and that of its intellectuals) in the brutal world politics of the Cold

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<sup>264</sup> In both affairs the PCF journal *Les Lettres françaises* tried to defend Stalin's USSR by accusing public figures of false allegations about it, leading to libel trials which it lost. Viktor Kravchenko's book, *I Chose Freedom* (1946), recounted his dissidence and defection to the West. David Rousset, an anti-fascist fighter and Buchenwald survivor, called in November 1949 on other survivors of German camps to help investigate similar Soviet crimes. See Herbert R. Lottman, *The Left Bank: Writers, Artists, and Politics from the Popular Front to the Cold War* (London: Heinemann, 1982), 266-274. For the PCF and its supporters these affairs simply heightened siege mentality; Drake, *Intellectuals*, 65-68.

<sup>265</sup> Lottman, 277-282; Drake, *Intellectuals*, 60-62; Michel-Antoine Burnier, *Les Existentialistes et la politique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), 63-75; David Drake, *Sartre* (London: Haus, 2005), 72-75.

<sup>266</sup> Drake, *Intellectuals*, 96; Drake, *Sartre*, 99.

War and the nuclear arms race. The whole of French culture, everything that France *stood for*, seemed to pale in comparison to the emergent world picture. Merleau-Ponty thought that “everything will be decided by brute force. Why speak since brute force is incapable of listening?”, and Simone de Beauvoir wondered, “What could one do, at this time, in France?”<sup>267</sup> This feeling of *impasse* on all levels – individual influence, collective action (of intellectuals or of the working class) and national power – is allegorised in Jean Genet’s play *Le Balcon*. Genet confronts intellectual ambivalence toward popular culture, toward authenticity and mediated experience, toward cultural production as effective transformative action, indeed toward the possibility of social change at all. As the following discussion shows, his view of social structure and its prospects is similarly dim.

### **Genet and *Le Balcon***

Sartre’s thoroughgoing ‘existential psychoanalysis’ of Jean Genet in his *Saint Genet* (1952), which from a preface became the entire first volume of Genet’s collected writings, summed up the man’s early life and work systematically. Yet the occurrences give an impression of a man who for four decades lived a disjointed, displaced life. Unwanted and abandoned by his mother to the *assistance publique*, Genet was placed variously in care institutions and with a foster family. Turning to petty crime as an adolescent, he was sent to a reformatory, escaped by joining the army, and after seven years deserted and began roaming Europe, living on theft and prostitution, until returning to Paris in 1937. Here, for over a decade, Genet was in and out of prison for desertion and other offences. It was during these spells in prison that he began to write, producing mostly autobiographical poetry, drama and prose. In 1944 Genet began publishing his work, starting with his poem *Le Condamné à mort*, published at his own expense, and with *Notre-Dame des Fleurs*, which got published thanks to his new friend Jean Cocteau. These were followed by the

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<sup>267</sup> Merleau-Ponty translated and quoted in Drake, *Intellectuals*, 77, citing Jean-Paul Sartre, “Merleau-Ponty vivant,” *Situations IV* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), 236; Beauvoir translated in Lottman, 284-285, citing Simone de Beauvoir, *La Force des choses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963).

novels *Le Miracle de la Rose* (1946) and *Querelle de Brest* (1947), by the play *Les Bonnes* (1947), and by a volume of collected poetry (1948).

In 1948 Genet was suddenly, and mainly due to a court mix-up, faced with a life sentence for recidivism. Thanks to Cocteau, together with Jean-Paul Sartre, who published in *Combat* an open letter to President Auriol on his behalf, backed by another plea endorsed by Picasso, Colette, Claudel, Aymé and others, Genet was pardoned in August 1949; he was never again imprisoned. His following publications – the play *Haute Surveillance* and particularly the fictionalised autobiography *Le Journal du voleur* – together with the intellectual pleas on his behalf, made 1949 the year of Genet's establishment as the 'noble rogue' of French letters. By early 1951, Gallimard started preparing Genet's collected (and now unexpurgated) works for publication, starting with Sartre's *Saint Genet*. Then, after three unproductive years, Genet wrote *Le Balcon* (and the outline for *Les Nègres*) throughout most of 1955, and published it in June 1956. Yet alongside Genet's clearly established fame and familiarity, his continual displacement and outsider lawlessness cemented his position as an untouchable. These were also the cause of his classlessness, which stands out in comparison with the clear working-class identification of both Sillitoe and Arthur Seaton. In his mid-forties, rich, esteemed and delightfully controversial, Genet was still writing from the margins of French society.

In London in late 1956, *Le Balcon* was being prepared for its world French-language premiere. The great theatrical sensations of the season were Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* and a much celebrated tour of the Berliner Ensemble, recently bereft of their director and playwright, Bertolt Brecht.<sup>268</sup> Not concerned with commercial success, a combative Genet soon fell out with the director, Peter Zadek, accusing him of making the play too polite, too English.

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<sup>268</sup> Barthes in the 1950s was preoccupied with Brecht, who remained his major non-French object of study. Barthes engaged with Brecht mainly through his essays in the journal *Théâtre Populaire*, and was greatly responsible for Brecht's introduction to French theatre and theatre studies. Moriarty, *Roland Barthes*, 4 46-47, 50; Calvet, 111, 140. Earlier treatments of the 'estrangement effect' (Shklovsky) and of the communicative functions of language (Jakobson) were only introduced to French readership in the 1966 translated anthology *Théorie de la littérature: textes des formalistes russes*, trans. and ed. by Tzvetan Todorov (Paris: Seuil, 1966).



The working relationship deteriorated until Zadek was thrown out of the last rehearsals, but on premiere night at the Arts Theatre Club, on 22 April 1957, it was Genet who was barred from entering the building. Some scandal ensued, which might have contributed to extensive censorship of the English-language version later staged in London. The French, however, were less impressed, and the May 1960 Paris premiere of *Le Balcon* (directed this time by the abler experimentalist Peter Brook) failed to attract scandal, critical acclaim, or indeed large audiences.<sup>269</sup> Nevertheless, *Le Balcon* was soon recognised as Genet's most substantial play.

Genet's theatrical work, and chief among it is *Le Balcon*, has since 1961 been considered as part of a wider theatrical genre dubbed by the critic Martin Esslin 'the Theatre of the Absurd'. This trend, which groups together works by Beckett, Ionesco, and the earlier Adamov, among others, essentially evokes concrete, expressive poetic images instead of rational, intellectual concepts and narrative structures, so as to communicate to the audience the authors' perplexity in the face of the human condition, and to challenge the audience to make sense of the theatrical spectacle and of their own experience of it. The absurdity presented to the audience is twofold: firstly, the absurd play deals with the more profound absurdity of human existence, reeling with a tragic sense of loss at the devaluation and disappearance of ultimate certainties; and secondly, it is a satirical mockery of automatic lives unconscious of this ultimate existence. Esslin claims the Theatre of the Absurd plays with language and its devaluation through gaps between spoken dialogue and stage occurrences. By privileging actual experience of things over the mere knowledge of them, the Theatre of the Absurd was part of a wider 'anti-literary' movement.<sup>270</sup> Despite criticism, Esslin's definition of the Theatre of the Absurd remains influential by virtue of Esslin's perception: almost in real time, he pointed out a trend or regularity in twentieth-century European theatre, and by giving it a collective name identified it and made it a frame of reference. In a way, Esslin's definition of the Theatre of

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<sup>269</sup> See Richard N. Coe, "Unbalanced Opinions: A Study of Jean Genet and the French Critics, followed by a Checklist of Criticism in French," *Proceedings of the Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society – Literary and Historical Section*, XIV, II (June 1970), 43, 49.

<sup>270</sup> Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, third edition (London: Methuen, 2001 [1961]), 23-26, 400, 419, 428.

the Absurd also helped 'sell' it to the wider public, much like the title 'Angry Young Men' helped 'sell' Amis, Braine, Wilson and Osborne, and, as will be shown in chapter 4, like the label *nouveaux romanciers* promoted the work of Robbe-Grillet, Sarraute, Butor and others.<sup>271</sup> In this gain, something was also lost: after all, as Barthes himself noted, writing only really remains new for the duration it takes to be recognised and familiar.<sup>272</sup>

Esslin defines Genet's theatre as a Theatre of the Absurd by enumerating the various traits it shares with other examples of the genre: an abandonment of character and motivation, as well as of a narrative plot; a focus, instead, on human situations and states of mind; and a rejection of didactic purpose linked with a devaluation of language and an assault on the spectators using harsh realities and images. In particular, adds Esslin, Genet's theatre is a theatre of social protest, but one which rejects all political prescriptions.<sup>273</sup> As for *Le Balcon* itself, Esslin claims that its revolutionaries

try to abolish a system of power based on mythical images. But in the very act of trying to break out of the iron ring of myth into the world of reality beyond it, they are compelled to construct their own myth. For it is by the fantasies of the masses that society is kept going.<sup>274</sup>

This, to Esslin, is the gist of *Le Balcon*, and it clearly qualifies the play – as a situation, a non-specific experience – as the twofold theatrical moment of the Absurd. Furthermore, Esslin's choice of terms (myth, construction, revolution, masses) make this passage relevant as an interpretive link between Genet's pessimist outlook and that of the intellectual pessimists discussed in the preceding subsection.

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<sup>271</sup> Unlike the critical disinterestedness of Esslin and the journalistic glibness behind the AYM label, the *nouveau roman* label was intentionally adopted (from a Maurice Nadeau review) by the publishers Minuit in order to promote their 'stable' of writers.

<sup>272</sup> "The proliferation of modes of writing brings a new Literature into being in so far as the latter invents its language only in order to be a project: Literature becomes the Utopia of language." Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, 88.

<sup>273</sup> Esslin, 233.

<sup>274</sup> Esslin, 221.

Summarising *Le Balcon* in a short synopsis highlights a problem which, though typical for Genet, was particularly pertinent here: over a decade, Genet rewrote his play several times, and there are four different editions of it available in print. The 1962 Barbezat edition is considered definitive and is the most inclusive as far as the contested and rewritten parts are concerned.<sup>275</sup> Madame Irma is proprietor of a brothel, the Grand Balcony: this setting for most of the play is fully equipped to enact clients' scenarios of wish-fulfilment. In the opening five tableaux, the clients cast themselves in roles of captains of State, such as Bishop, General and Judge, in situations which highlight and aggrandise their roles and importance. Outside the brothel a revolution is in progress, in which the rebels are successful enough to overthrow the figureheads of the old regime. One of Irma's girls, Chantal, escapes the brothel to become her own ideal figure – a revolutionary heroine – but is then killed and made into a second ideal figure, that of the martyr. As the tables turn, the clients who played Bishop, General and Judge replace the 'real' officials who were killed, and Irma is crowned as the new queen, addressing her new subjects from the Grand Balcony. Roger, a defeated revolutionary leader, arrives at the brothel to enact a scenario in which he is the Chief of Police; all along, as the oppressed party, he has craved the position of his oppressor. When he realises this – both materially and mentally – he castrates himself, symbolising the exhaustion and invalidation of the revolution at the moment of its very success. In conclusion, the Chief of Police assumes the role of Death in another of the brothel's fantasy spaces, a mausoleum studio. Irma then closes shop for the day and sends the spectators home, to their real lives, where she promises everything will be less true than in the theatrical spectacle.

A central trait of *Le Balcon* is the intentionally blurred, and often ignored, distinction between 'representation' and 'reality'. Not only do some characters on stage have difficulty distinguishing their real roles from their performed ones (and thus fall back on empty truisms: who is the real plumber? the one who fixes the taps) but it is also unclear whether the entire revolution is another grand

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<sup>275</sup> Edmund White, *Genet*, with a chronology by Albert Dichy (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993), 480. For a comparative discussion of the versions see also: David H. Walker, "Revolution and Revisions in Genet's 'Le Balcon'," *The Modern Language Review* 79, 4 (October 1984), 817-830.

spectacle of titillation enacted within the Grand Balcony, or whether a 'real' revolution penetrates the brothel to crown Madame Irma as Queen. More noticeably, theatrical difference between stage and audience is breached when Irma turns to speak directly to the audience in the last scene. And where is the false 'here' that she implies: is it the brothel, the entire play, or the whole theatrical experience of the audience? Clearly, Genet's professed aim of glorifying Image and Reflection was meticulously adhered to; it does, however, leave the audience confused as to what the play is about and what they should make of it.<sup>276</sup> Of course, that was Genet's intention: the theatrical spectacle *cannot* be the scene where external, social issues are resolved.

Despite ostensibly resisting inferred referential readings of his play, Genet did start writing *Le Balcon* about a specific historical context: the Spanish Civil War and its outcome. Genet admitted as much at the time, adding that the self-castration of Roger was equivalent to the Republican concession of defeat, but claiming that it was more an original inspiration than an ongoing model.<sup>277</sup> Yet *Le Balcon* cannot be separated from the social reality in which it was created or received. In fact, its content and mise-en-abyme structure (of a representation within a representation, theatre within theatre) carry a complex political message. The blurring of theatre (the performative) and real life (the material) recasts the staged event as a significantly more authoritative locus, and the deliberate baring of its artificiality is not simply demystifying but also aiming straight for the principles and attitudes of the audience. Therefore, despite Genet's personal anarchism and his insistence that *Le Balcon* not be read as referring to a specific political situation, its unrealistic artificiality "does not betoken political nihilism" but rather a resentment toward "the essential unreality of ideology" or other

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<sup>276</sup> Jean Genet, "Comment jouer *Le Balcon*," *Œuvres Complètes* vol. 4 (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), 276.

<sup>277</sup> "My point of departure was situated in Spain, Franco's Spain, and the revolutionary who castrates himself was all those Republicans when they had admitted their defeat. And then my play continued to grow in its own direction and Spain in another." Translated and quoted in White, 476-477. For the original interview see Michel Breitman, "J'ai été victime d'une tentative d'assassinat," *Arts* no. 617 (May 1957).

“dangerous aspects of the theatricality of everyday life.”<sup>278</sup> The mise-en-abyme in *Le Balcon* is anti-realist, but its target is a particular kind of social reality.

This is one way in which *Le Balcon*’s artificiality can be reconciled with referentiality. A second way was suggested by the Belgian Marxist sociologist Lucien Goldmann. In his first commentary on the play, written after seeing Peter Brook’s 1960 Parisian production, Goldmann asserted that “it is perfectly realistic insofar as it transposes onto the literary level the fundamental transformations that modern society has undergone over the past forty years.”<sup>279</sup> As Goldmann reads the play, the main loci of power in the play are Irma (enterprise technocracy, economic power) and the Chief of Police (State technocracy, political power), and so in this and other ways the play reflects – beyond its more immediately apparent themes of mirroring, sexuality and representation – contemporary social reality in a didactic way, thus making it the first French Brechtian play.<sup>280</sup> Goldmann sees *Le Balcon* as a literary transposition of the experience of the European (and, in that, the French) radical Left between 1917 and 1923, which had shaped its mentality as a critical but frustrated consciousness, oriented toward a vision of overcoming capitalism by revolt, a fantasy frustrated by the fascination of the ruled with their rulers.<sup>281</sup> The contemporary experience of the European Left is thus another facet of the realism of Genet’s plays (or of Robbe-Grillet’s fiction, on whom Goldmann was to elaborate later, in his *Toward a Sociology of the Novel*) by reflecting the changed nature of experience under capitalism, where the relationship between society and its cultural products is no longer mediated by group consciousness (of class or ideology).<sup>282</sup>

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<sup>278</sup> Walker, 830; White, 487.

<sup>279</sup> Lucien Goldmann, “Genet’s *The Balcony*: A Realist Play,” trans. Robert Sayre, *Praxis: A Journal of Radical Perspectives on the Arts* 4 (1978), 129. Originally published as Lucien Goldmann, “Une Pièce réaliste: *Le Balcon* de Genet,” *Les Temps Modernes* 171 (June 1960).

<sup>280</sup> Goldmann, “A Realist Play,” 125, 127, 130.

<sup>281</sup> Lucien Goldmann, “The Theater of Genet: A Sociological Study,” trans. Pat Dreyfus, in *Genet: A Collection of Critical Essays*, eds.: Peter Brooks and Joseph Halpern (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1979), 33, 35, 39-40.

<sup>282</sup> Robert Sayre, “Goldmann and Modern Realism: Introduction to the *Balcony* Article,” *Praxis: A Journal of Radical Perspectives on the Arts* 4 (1978), 117.

Goldmann suggested two ways of interpreting *Le Balcon* as realistic: firstly, because it conveys the worldview of the European Left, which, to Goldmann, was shaped by a specific historical dynamics, of the threat and frustration of revolution in our times; and secondly, because it transcribes social structure independently of group consciousness: it is a 'social realist' piece without the usual reference to class or ideology (certainly expected by Goldmann's great inspiration, Georg Lukács).<sup>283</sup> Goldmann's suggestions take *Le Balcon* as a significant realist piece *in spite of* Genet's intentions and not *because of* them; not for its main themes and characters, but for its secondary content and categorical structure. As such, Goldmann's interpretation withstands Edmund White's insistence that "Genet's analysis of power is not Marxist": indeed, it was not Marxist in any conventional sense.<sup>284</sup> Goldmann did not interpret Genet's intentions, but rather the (unintended) reflection of his worldview in the structure of his play. Goldmann's more systematic (and 'committed') interpretation is thus reconciled with Genet's anarchism and non-conformism, and captures Genet's disdain for 'revolutionary types' and his cultivation of actual exclusion into a worldview.<sup>285</sup>

Goldmann's interpretation is not inconsistent with Sartre's suggestion in *Saint Genet* that the central theme of all of Genet's works is oppression; although Goldmann interprets oppression in the Marxist social-economic sense, whereas Sartre was more interested in constructing an 'existential psychoanalysis' of Genet, showing the limits of both psychoanalysis and Marxism in the face of a total explanation offered in terms of liberty and (self-)liberation.<sup>286</sup> At the time Sartre attempted a systematic introduction of the (existentialist) problem of freedom into Marxism, in the face of its current and oppressive political interpretations in Soviet Stalinism and in monolithic PCF Communism.<sup>287</sup> *Saint Genet* marks a turning point in Sartre's attitude toward Marxism, signalling the

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<sup>283</sup> This elaborates the final point in Sayre, 120.

<sup>284</sup> White, 487-488.

<sup>285</sup> Goldmann, "The Theater of Genet," 32, 35.

<sup>286</sup> See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Saint Genet: Comédien et martyr* (Paris: Gallimard, 1952), 536.

<sup>287</sup> Ian Birchall, "The Politics of *Saint Genet*," in *Flowers and Revolution: A Collection of Writings on Jean Genet*, eds.: Barbara Read and Ian Birchall (London: Middlesex University Press, 1997), 182.

start of a succession of events – the Paris demonstrations against General Ridgway, the arrest of Jacques Duclos, Sartre’s break with Camus over *The Rebel* – which eventually led to Sartre’s fellow-travelling years.<sup>288</sup> When *Saint Genet* was published as the first volume of Genet’s collected works, it was so comprehensive that it immediately became an unavoidable point of reference for later critiques of Genet, particularly in his non-theatrical work. Sartre’s conceptual analysis of Genet’s scandalous life in crime and writing, which was mostly considered obscene, installed Genet as an archetypal existential man, and sought to understand his choices along the lines of existential choices and his double exclusion and oppression as a homosexual and a criminal. Genet’s biography is reconstructed by Sartre’s ‘existential psychoanalysis’ as harking back to an abrupt moment of trauma when his personal expression was introduced into the social as a crime, leading (and here Sartre follows Nietzsche and Scheler) to a resentment, which then manifests itself in a willingness to adopt society’s conception of him and become the morally reprehensible figure of legend – that is, until he discovered a positive way to correct his bad image through poetry.<sup>289</sup> Genet offered various responses to Sartre’s essay, ranging from the resentful to the dismissive, claiming he had never read it through (it is nearly 700 pages long).<sup>290</sup>

Betrayal is an important theme in most of Genet’s works and can be read in several ways. Preliminarily, the treachery shown by some of Genet’s characters can be understood, like revolt (which sometimes accompanies it), in terms of reaction to oppression, as the excluded and downtrodden taking their revenge on society. Edward Said has attributed Genet’s recurrent treatment of betrayal as an assertion of identity, arising from the need of an independent individual who has created his own selfhood and values to stay creative and unbound.<sup>291</sup> Another explanation has been proposed recently, and it proposes to close a gap left by the greatest systematic interpreter of Genet after Sartre, his

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<sup>288</sup> Birchall, 178.

<sup>289</sup> Davies, 29, 59, 87; see also Max Scheler, *L’Homme du ressentiment*, traduction revue et corrigée (Paris: Gallimard, 1970).

<sup>290</sup> Birchall, 177.

<sup>291</sup> Edward Said, “On Jean Genet’s Late Works,” in *Imperialism and Theatre*, ed: J. Ellen Gainor (London: Routledge, 1995), 238.

biographer Edmund White. White seems puzzled by the pride a traitor might take in his disloyalty. But in *Le Balcon*, unfaithfulness is displayed as a matter of course, indeed of pride: the revolution deposes one queen only to replace her with another (Irma); Chantal abandons her mistress and is then shot by the revolutionaries when she is introduced to the new queen; Roger betrays the revolutionary ideal by trying to imitate the Chief of Police.

Reviewing White's autobiography, Adam Phillips suggests that disloyalty can be the source of pride just as it is certainly a source of gratification, as Genet has a "sense of the ethical necessity, indeed the ecstasy of betrayal."<sup>292</sup> That ecstasy is not merely a reaction to oppression or a protection of a sense of self, but a gesture toward the future with a new social programme – like the revolution in the play – which fails. In that programme Genet replaces fidelity and obligation by a new kind of intimacy, an *impersonal intimacy* or communion which is ad hoc and almost Situationist in character, and which is purportedly more reflective of one's true sentiments at any given moment.<sup>293</sup> Phillips goes on: "Loyalty may be the traditional bond, but it may not be the only one; trust may be cherished, but what if it is something of a protection racket?"<sup>294</sup> Therefore, if fidelity is not categorical but contingent, to be most truthful and honest to someone would lead one to eventually betray their trust. Conceptually, this creates a nihilistic equation of truth and lie which voids good and bad, consistency and validity. This seems to be the most socially encompassing and the starkest reading of betrayal in Genet, and so the most relevant to our thematic of social structure.

Reading Genet in these terms casts him as a pessimist. Certainly, if only from notes like *Comment jouer Le Balcon* (appended to the 1962 version), Genet is utterly pessimistic about culture, and expressly theatre, as a means of transformative action. Unlike dramatists such as Brecht, he acknowledges no way in which theatre can be a mobilising or even constructively alienating medium. Worse still, theatre (especially realist theatre) creates the dangerous

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<sup>292</sup> Adam Phillips, "What You Really Want," *London Review of Books* 27 (21), 3.11.2005, 7.

<sup>293</sup> As such it sits well with the great inspiration Genet took from the anarchist movement and its thought, and anticipates the future direction both of Genet's work and of the French radical Left.

<sup>294</sup> Phillips, 7.



illusion that social problems are being resolved on stage. *Le Balcon*'s methods resist this illusion.<sup>295</sup>

Despite his insistence on the exclusive efficacy of direct political action over cultural action, Genet is ultimately also pessimistic about the transformative prospects of real-life revolt. As an anarchist, Genet was unimpressed by 'revolutionary types' and saw them as compensating with zeal for merit. Lucien Goldmann was not wide of the mark in seeing Genet's vision of revolutions as always already frustrated by the fascination with the rulers they aim to overthrow, which then leads revolutionaries to imitate them (Genet makes this point in *Le Balcon* but opposes it later in the more immediate *Les Nègres*). *Le Balcon* also portrays revolution as an illusion, a play of images and roles like any other in life, which is moreover premised on ideological foundations, illusory in their own right. This kind of programmatic commitment to ideals seems deeply artificial, and Genet resists it and presents it as flawed.

It is tempting to read into *Le Balcon* a third kind of pessimism, an essentially elitist fear of the masses tempered by a fascination with the alternative and irreverent. Irma fears the crowd's victory as the dull and unimaginative erotics of the rebels would ruin her business of purveying illusions. Likewise Genet, in his demanding construction of *Le Balcon* and repeated dissatisfaction with its 'vulgarisation' in stage productions, searched for discerning crowds with more complex tastes. Genet's sympathy toward the oppressed was not akin to the French leftist intellectual's populist fascination with workers and peasants: Genet could not have been a Maoist because, while seeing sense and even moral superiority in the position of the subordinate, empathy toward it would entail identification with it. He clearly had no illusions that alongside the moral high ground was an agenda of conservative tastes and reactionary morals which could not win his solidarity.

These pessimistic elements in Genet are similar to those of Barthes in *Mythologies*, the effective contemporary of *Le Balcon*. Both works express an ambivalent attitude toward revolution, its prospects and its moral status; and a trenchant belief in an individualism which defies conformism. Ungar suggests

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<sup>295</sup> Cf. David Bradby, "Genet, the Theatre and the Algerian War," in Read and Birchall (eds.), 158, 163.

that while Barthes is obviously keen to disclose the mythical structure of bourgeois culture, he is also fascinated by its power and mechanisms naturalising bourgeois hegemony, suggesting an aesthetics of artifice in which our idea of Nature is completely constructed by the capitalist system.<sup>296</sup> In pursuing an aesthetics of artifice, in which reality and illusion are blurred, Barthes and Genet read like latter-day Decadents.

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<sup>296</sup> Ungar, 105.

### ***Summary: Marginality and Entrapment***

Several of the attitudes surveyed above express a sense of marginality and of entrapment in the given social order. These positions sometimes seem paradoxical. Lamenting the immutability of the postwar social order, they belittle the effects of the great *mutation sociale* brought about by modernisation and changing state policies. Conversely, protesting against social changes, usually massification, in their respective societies, writers like Genet and Sillitoe, as well as Leavis and Lefebvre, downplay underlying cultural and structural continuities.

In Britain, the opinions presented highlight disillusionment with the newly affluent society, leading Hoggart and Sillitoe to invoke 'bread and circuses' imagery to illuminate the disappointing 'wrong turn' members of the working class had taken in seeking individual mobility, rather than class identity and solidarity. The 'bread and circuses' trope is also applied to the intellectual elites: here it taps into a long tradition of intellectual pessimism that had begun with Arnold, was updated in the interwar generation by Leavis, and inspired the postwar work of Williams. According to this tradition, culture in its normative sense, demanding of each person to develop his 'best self' through the compelling inspiration of cultural canon, is continually threatened by the democratising processes of massification, rooted in the catastrophic legacy of the industrial revolution.

This prevalent 'bread and circuses' trope was initially informed by a discontent with progress: the detrimental effects of the industrial revolution on local communities and their 'organic' cultures was seen as irreversible; as the postwar British welfare state deepened its dependency on industrial labour, and effectively created the 'affluent workers' as the predominant, and philistine, type of cultural consumer. Inasmuch as the image of Sillitoe's Nottingham is essentially that of Blake's dehumanising 'dark satanic mills', there is a romantic, reactionary streak to this trope which renders it a basic shade of technological pessimism. This conservative approach is thoroughly imbued with nostalgia for bygone days (Hoggart's and Arthur Seaton's youth) or for extinct golden ages (imagined by Frank and Queenie Leavis), invoked as benchmarks to indict the fallen, dissolute present.

It is easy to see how redemptive horizons might have narrowed. Leavis saw it as the role of the literary scholar to preserve the embers of English culture and its great tradition in the halls of academe, where only the willing would tap into them in earnest. Hoggart and Williams turned to excavating contemporary Britain and its literature in order to recover older working-class traditions; both also tried to revise Marxist theories in view of contemporary mass society and to find political alternatives to Labour socialism. But it emerges from *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* that Sillitoe did not have a clear idea of ways in which Arthur, the discontented nonconformist worker, could break out of his existential entrapment.

Sillitoe gestures at the hopelessness of Arthur's situation, suggesting it cannot be ameliorated except through a total dismantling of the social order, as in a nuclear catastrophe: the only way to break out of the 'bread and circuses' trap is to burn Rome down. However, it is not at all clear that its inheritors would be more virtuous than the deposed: in fact, Genet's *Le Balcon* suggests that the revolutionaries are just as flawed as the establishment they overthrow. This is partly because the pretenders to cultural hegemony implicitly admire and imitate the authoritarian ways of their rulers, becoming ultimately impotent as agents of transformation. Setting his play in a brothel, Genet was indicating the inessential, prostituted nature of power as well as its confinement to situations of complicit submission; that the brothel should specialise in fetishistic role-playing suggests the fantasised, mythical element of all social types, and so their essential similarity.

The more things change, the more they stay the same. This is the pessimistic truth of entrapment in the social order, viewed with the knowing disillusionment of a belated Ecclesiastes who deciphered the cultural code. For both Sillitoe and Genet, and Barthes in *Mythologies*, the revolution of the oppressed is doomed to fail, at least inasmuch as it perpetuates a structure of domination. Moreover, to Barthes as to Lefebvre, the very system of everyday signs conveys a constructed discursive order that is part and parcel of the consumerist 'bread and circuses' of mass culture, from politics, through cars and washing powders, to the cinema, sports and public spaces. 'Demystifying' the signs of systematic oppression is for Barthes and Lefebvre the beginning of

undeceived resistance, but at least to Barthes, it also marginalises the ‘mythologist’ in an otherwise complicit mass society.

There is no nostalgia for premodernised society in these French writings. This distinguishes them sharply from the British works discussed, in part because of the legacy of occupation. Rather than drawing on the historical or pseudo-historical memory, the French tended to measure the present against abstract, ideological normative notions of society. This abstract normative notion of culture as a redemptive endeavour was challenged by Genet and Barthes: Genet is careful to dissociate between theatre and transformative action, and Barthes does not expect change from the depoliticised, mythologised cultures of the bourgeoisie and the left. Abstract normative notions are thus no less compelling than romantic nostalgia as foundations for critical and pessimistic outlooks on present culture. It is the source of these abstractions that distinguishes between Barthes and Genet: while the former affected it as an intellectual posture, the latter’s cultivation of marginality sprang out of earlier real exclusion.

In sum, Britain and France shared a common disappointed reaction to progress and its social effects, which cast the postwar social situation under the sign of the ‘bread and circuses’ image. To different observers this common reaction, which had its precedents at least since the industrial revolution, either reinforced the prevalent social order or threatened it. The national divergences in cultural pessimism regarding social structure concerned attitudes toward history. In Britain, discontents with the effects of progress led observers to seek their affective compensation in history or (no less usefully) the pseudo-historical, leading to nostalgic reactions. In France, a long legacy of political discord was compounded by recent experiences that many French wished to forget. Unlike their British counterparts, French observers wishing to criticise the present had no recourse to the model of history; instead, their reaction to the discontents of progress was a flight *from* history and to the abstract normative values of culture which had proved so important to French collective definition. Both compensations – the nostalgic and the universal – were attempts to grapple with a challenging present that was still in flux. The fact that different observers saw this flow leading in opposite directions – affirmation of the social order and its transformation – demonstrates the self-referential character of the culturally pessimistic gaze and its pliability in the service of different agendas.

## **Section 2: Cultural Pessimism and National Identity**

### ***Chapter 3: Eroding British Realities***

The gap between the middle and the working class diminished after the war. The social processes that led to working-class affluence also resulted in middle-class impoverishment. The erosion of clear class boundaries contributed to already-growing anxieties about Britain's role as an impoverished country with a crumbling worldwide empire. British politics and culture were dominated by a search for stability and by a desire to redefine national identity. Many of the most radical changes in these fields took place in the cultural realm.

In the following chapter, the moves from 'British' (present) to 'English' (past) identity are not accidental elisions, but reflect the lacking nature of the 'British' label and identity, which for that reason were all too often used interchangeably with the more primordial and meaningful 'English', regardless of the problematic and reductive nature of this trend of usage. The relative synthetic newness of 'British' was validated by the longstanding 'English' to the point of their equation by many in the cultural hubs of south-east England.

A preoccupation with the image of Britain is manifest in the postwar reformulation of academic pursuit, at least in three disciplines informing it. The image of history and of historians as its custodians was redefined, becoming more accessible to the public, not least through the mass media. English as an academic discipline grew in scope, student intake and importance. In the early 1960s, through the expansion of higher education and the changes in academic history and English, the new discipline of cultural studies also found an institutional foothold. Yet in spite of their modernisation, the humanities were considered to be in crisis, chiefly because their role as cultural canon and moral compass seemed to be usurped by science and technology which promised to steer humanity – and Britain in it – toward a more peaceful and more prosperous future.

Popular fascination with the future was countered by attempts to redefine the British present by reference to the traditions of British past. The Arts Council promoted a particularly and distinctively English kind of popular culture. The

failed experiment of the Third Programme illustrated how out of date, economically, politically and socially, such attitudes were. A different response to changed postwar circumstances came from the voluntary National Trust, and its growing success in making 'tradition' popular became a precursor of the British 'heritage industry'. The notion of 'heritage' as history, together with an exploration of changed middle-class socioeconomic conditions, and the changed status and image of academics in postwar Britain, are all addressed in the novel *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes*. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of this, the best-known of Angus Wilson's novels.

## Reformulating Knowledge

The 1950s saw slow but decisive changes in British frameworks of knowledge and culture, accompanied by much, and mostly public, deliberation. The social historian Peter Burke has described the 1950s as a period of transition in the history of academic historical research in Britain.<sup>297</sup> This transition mainly consisted of the opening of the discipline to external influences, diversifying its subject matters and the emergence of specialised fields within it. British historians had previously displayed what Gareth Stedman Jones in 1967 famously called a 'peculiar myopia' – an almost exclusive interest in particular historical episodes or subjects, neglecting general interpretations of the past, historical theory and historical method.<sup>298</sup> British historians until the 1950s had been decidedly English, by which I mean they believed that empiricism, common sense and the perspective of the interested amateur (rather than the qualified professional) were essential, national traits that set them apart from Continental historians.<sup>299</sup> The 'peculiar myopia' of British historians was coupled with a general suspicion of sociology (considered too general in comparison with the

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<sup>297</sup> Peter Burke, "Historiography and Philosophy of History," in *History and Historians in the Twentieth Century*, ed. by Peter Burke (Oxford: Oxford University Press/The British Academy, 2002), 233.

<sup>298</sup> Gareth Stedman Jones, "The Pathology of English History," *New Left Review* 46 (1967), 29-43.

<sup>299</sup> Burke, 232; compare with Wilson's tirade on British 'sins' of the 1950s: Angus Wilson, "Fourteen Points," *Encounter* XVIII (January 1962), 10-12.

specific, concrete fieldwork of anthropology), both taken by Perry Anderson in 1968 to be symptoms of the 'absent centre' of British bourgeois society: reinforcing the stability of British social structure by having no total and synthetic theory of itself.<sup>300</sup>

The transformation of British history writing in the 1950s was most conspicuous in the proliferation of new works on questions of historiography by the likes of Isaiah Berlin, Arnaldo Momigliano, Herbert Butterfield and Hugh Trevor-Roper. These new attempts at theorising historical research and historical explanation, previously thought redundant and foreign to historical enquiry, now dragged the most basic terms, like 'historical fact', 'historical process', and 'causation', into deliberation. The most influential works framing these 'long 1950s' were R.G. Collingwood's posthumous *The Idea of History* (1946), and E.H. Carr's 1961 Trevelyan lectures, published as *What Is History?* (1961). Secondly, following American and continental historical research, the work of John Pocock and Quentin Skinner was later credited with the establishment in Britain of the sub-disciplines of cultural history and history of ideas. Thirdly, British economic and social historians began to extensively revise their methods and assumptions. This due in part to growing interest in historiography, and in part to the new influence of Marxist thought on historical research, introduced into Britain by the work of members of the Communist Party Historians' Group, the likes of Christopher Hill, Eric Hobsbawm, and Edward Thompson. In the following decade this enabled wider introduction of translated Continental 'theory' (e.g. works by Lévi-Strauss and Foucault) which would have been improbable in the late 1940s.<sup>301</sup>

Like the profession itself, the popular face of history was changing. Elaine Showalter traced this change through fictional representations of academics, particularly historians, between C.P. Snow's *The Masters* (1951) and Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* (1954).<sup>302</sup> The transformation consisted of a

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<sup>300</sup> Perry Anderson, "Components of the National Culture," *New Left Review* 50 (July-August 1968), 12, 56. Of course, the positions of Anderson and Stedman Jones share another specific perspective, that of late-1960s Marxists.

<sup>301</sup> Burke, 233-237, 243, 249.

<sup>302</sup> Elaine Showalter, *Faculty Towers: The Academic Novel and Its Discontents* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 14-33.



weakening of a Trollopian mode, which had represented British academe as a small, cohesive community, a *mise en abyme* of traditional Little England through which larger social and moral issues could be examined. True to the Trollopian mode, Snow's historical fiction presented an idealised view of an irredeemable past of fixed hierarchies, reinforced by constant reference to age and generation. Snow focused on careerism as played out regarding academic hierarchy, intellect, wealth and class. Nevertheless, the pettiness he contrasted with human rationality did not weaken his faith in the ideal of professional enquiry and academic knowledge.<sup>303</sup>

*Lucky Jim* set a new trend in the academic novel. Comical but not always light-hearted, Amis's send-up of historians effectively rejected the model of Snow's *The Masters*. Snow's self-sufficient mandarins sheltered among dreaming spires were replaced by Amis's struggling young lecturers in a suffocating Red-Brick prison. Jim Dixon lacked conviction in the validity and importance of his research (into medieval ship-building) and, disillusioned with lecturing, longed for another life. In Amis's contemporary setting, the sublimated homoerotic passions of Snow's all-male faculty were breached by women academics, awful but still real and embodied objects of desire.<sup>304</sup> Amis's academic fiction was an influential but effectively minor vision for the intellectual elites: it reflected and addressed a limited group that, like the rest of the old middle class, found itself in a postwar crisis of identity.<sup>305</sup>

A marked change was also apparent in English departments. Originating in the late nineteenth century, English as a discrete field of study sprang from two disparate motivations: the utilitarian pursuit of literacy, and a romantic-conservative view of English literature as an inspirational fount of national spirit.<sup>306</sup> In its latter capacity, English studies became in the interwar years the foundry of national cultivation, entrusted with the spiritual mission of guarding 'national conscience' by instilling the 'literary values' represented in the national

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<sup>303</sup> Showalter, 16, 22, 118.

<sup>304</sup> Showalter, 23-25, 33. In *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes*, the characters of Gerald Middleton and Rose Lorimer are the fictional 'descendants' of Jim Dixon.

<sup>305</sup> Philip Tew, *The Contemporary British Novel* (London and New York: Continuum, 2006), 38, 51.

<sup>306</sup> Brian Doyle, *English and Englishness* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 2, 11-12.

literary canon. However, Britain's postwar cultural and economic position pressured English departments to redefine themselves in terms of the social value of humane education, indeed all higher education, in the new welfare state as a liberal democracy. 'High' culture was considered to have declined in authority and influence as science and technology grew more popular. Many feared that the study of English literature was no longer considered intrinsically important to the formation of British subjects. Leavis was a dominant voice in this debate, advocating (not without opposition) the broadening of English from literary criticism to more encompassing studies of culture.<sup>307</sup>

In the British welfare state of the early 1950s, general university attendance grew dramatically, and there was a considerable demand for English studies. More staff positions were created and the discipline itself grew, not least through new interdisciplinary and joint programmes (like 'general studies') in Red Brick universities and polytechnics. A further expansion followed the adoption of the 1963 Robbins Report on higher education, in the establishment of eleven 'new universities'.<sup>308</sup> Still, questions of principle regarding the value of English studies in higher education remained: Kingsley Amis, for example, insisted that in educational expansionism 'more will mean worse'.<sup>309</sup> Not only was 'high' culture seen to be losing currency, Amis's elitist critique also implied the qualitative degradation of expert knowledge, retreating into a conservational yet merely functional role. As the historian J.H. Plumb asserted, this was 'the crisis in the humanities', and it was a crisis of purpose and value, a qualitative and moral crisis unsolved and even aggravated by the growing demand for higher education.<sup>310</sup>

Universities were not the only settings for critical engagement with English literature. As Leavis's journal *Scrutiny* folded in 1952, other literary journals were flourishing, notably Stephen Spender's *Encounter* and Cyril Connolly's *Horizon*. These were based among the metropolitan literary and

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<sup>307</sup> Doyle, 98, 106, 114.

<sup>308</sup> Doyle, 99-100, 108, 111-112. Significantly, the Robbins Committee (discussed in chapter 6) was instructed to reassess English higher education in terms of 'national needs and resources'

<sup>309</sup> Kingsley Amis, "Lone Voices," *Encounter* XV, 1 (July 1960), 9.

<sup>310</sup> J.H. Plumb, "The Historian's Dilemma," in *Crisis in the Humanities*, ed. by J.H. Plumb (Harmondsworth: Penguin/Pelican, 1964), 24-44. See also his introduction to the volume.

belletrist intelligentsia, which relied less on formalised contact with their readership and more on proximity to literary publishers and to authors. The metropolitan literary intelligentsia was committed to the exacting standards of high culture without academic self-justifying agendas, and their critical endeavour seemed to cater solely to elite audiences and their interests. As ‘natural Luddites’, 1950s metropolitan literary intellectuals opposed the popular vision of redemption-by-technology, and their opposition to the promethean image of scientists put them in an impossible position of perceived irrelevance.<sup>311</sup>

The problematic popular image of the literary intellectuals was publicly highlighted by Sir Charles Percy Snow, a novelist but also a Cambridge physicist and civil servant. His contentious 1956 essay, “The Two Cultures,” was elaborated in his 1959 Rede lecture at Cambridge, later published as *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*.<sup>312</sup> Snow suggested there was an epistemic and conceptual split between science and literature, rupturing communications between them; he also argued plainly for the primacy and superiority of science. In the ‘Sputnik years’, Snow did not see his literary traditionalism as contrasting with his confidence in scientific innovation, at a time of high hopes for technology’s social and political benefits.<sup>313</sup> His wish that technology spearhead a pragmatic new politics to lead mankind to better future was typical of the ‘end of ideology’ age.<sup>314</sup>

Snow’s lecture angered Leavis, another self-appointed guardian of culture and public morals, who responded with a general and personal attack in his 1962

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<sup>311</sup> Krishan Kumar, *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 388-389. The Classical Prometheus, like the Christian Faust, is a tragic, pessimist figure, demonstrating the sorrows reaped by the pursuit of greater knowledge and ability.

<sup>312</sup> Charles Percy Snow, *The Two Cultures*, introduction by Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Canto/Cambridge University Press, 1998 [1959]); originally C.P. Snow, “The Two Cultures,” *New Statesman and Nation* LIII (6 October 1956), 413-414.

<sup>313</sup> Stefan Collini, “Introduction,” in Snow, viii, xxxii, xli-xlii.

<sup>314</sup> This refers to Daniel Bell’s argument that old Western humanist ideologies were spent and unable to guide or explain social behaviour. Western democracies triumphed in reducing ideology (and history) to insignificance. Most of Bell’s *End of Ideology* work was done in connection with the Congress for Cultural Freedom, an anti-totalitarian organisation (and covert CIA operation) also supporting *Encounter*. Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press, 1960).

Richmond lecture, “Two Cultures? The Significance of C.P. Snow.”<sup>315</sup> Leavis’s response stoked a heated debate that extended to national newspapers and even internationally.<sup>316</sup> Leavis and others were incensed by Snow’s treatment of the old chestnut of the human consequences of the Industrial Revolution in British society. Then again, Snow’s views were as idealised and nostalgic as Leavis’s. Stefan Collini suggests that Snow’s late-1950s outlook was shaped by his nostalgia for the 1930s, the time of his personal formation, recollected (as his fiction, mentioned above, shows) as a ‘golden age’ of science and positivism. It was in 1930s Cambridge that Snow also became hostile toward literary intellectuals whom he saw as snobbish enemies of ‘progress’.<sup>317</sup> Snow’s wish, to depoliticise the public sphere so as to enable the leadership of scientists, was guided by his progressivist optimism and by Soviet destalinisation, as Lionel Trilling observed in his intervention late in 1962; Trilling also condemned Leavis’s attack as parochial.<sup>318</sup> Trilling thought that while “the world will not be saved by teaching English at universities, nor, indeed, by any other literary activity,” the wish to see scientific Reason manage the world was also inadequate, even dangerous “if it leads us to deny the actuality of politics in the present.”<sup>319</sup> Trilling was probably right to call a stalemate in the Two Cultures debate; but he too conceded the problematic state of literary culture.

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<sup>315</sup> F.R. Leavis, *Two Cultures? The Significance of C.P. Snow, Being the Richmond Lecture, 1962* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1962).

<sup>316</sup> Leavis campaigned vigorously, spreading his gospel, “Luddites? or There Is Only One Culture,” on a 1966 American lecture tour and in two subsequent books: F.R. Leavis and Q.D. Leavis, *Lectures in America* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1969); F.R. Leavis, *Nor Shall My Sword: Discourses on Pluralism, Compassion and Social Hope* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1972). Discounting their personal enmities, the Snow-Leavis debate tapped into already familiar debates between Romantics (Coleridge) and Utilitarians (Bentham), and later between Matthew Arnold and T.H. Huxley; Collini, xxxv.

<sup>317</sup> Collini, xxvii. Snow, a left-liberal, was antagonised by the political conservatism of the English high modernists, and their literary experimentation grated against his traditional realism; Collini, lii.

<sup>318</sup> Collini, xxxix, lxix; Lionel Trilling, “The Leavis-Snow Controversy,” *Beyond Culture: Essays on Literature and Learning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980 [1965]), 126-154.

<sup>319</sup> Trilling, “The Leavis-Snow Controversy,” 128, 142.

There were other manifestations of the ‘crisis in the humanities’. In a 1964 book of that title, scholars from various humanities disciplines mourned the seeming disorientation and decline in status of the humanities. The popular historian J.H. Plumb, surveyed with concern the loss of faith in Western progress since Macaulay.<sup>320</sup> Historians, he claimed, could no longer affirm the belief in human progress: their newfound interest in historiography, partisanship and interpretation ruled out the force of historical objectivity. Together with the rise of the natural sciences and the scientific attitude, this put historians in a barren, increasingly irrelevant position.<sup>321</sup> In the same volume, Ernest Gellner considered the crisis of ‘humanism’, as he called it, as a real challenge to the practical applicability of wide learning and liberal values. “The issue of the ‘two cultures’ is utterly misconceived... as a problem of *communication* between two cultures,” he suggested, “the real and deeper problem concerns just what, if anything, it is that the humanities have to communicate.”<sup>322</sup> Gellner’s comments reinforced a broader sense that no grand narrative or sense of overcoming was emerging from postwar British literary culture.<sup>323</sup>

Amid these jeremiads for the humanities, the emerging field of Cultural Studies seemed fresh, focused and optimistic. As shown in chapter 1, two of its founding works did not conform to traditional academic disciplinary divisions or to the humanities as a whole: Williams’s book was a cultural history, and Hoggart’s book blended social theory, ethnography and autobiography. Cultural studies finally gained its institutional foothold in 1964 with the establishment of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. Leavisite culturalism in English studies and the reorientation of historical study toward social history legitimated the kind of enquiry typical of cultural studies; its brand of ‘home anthropology’

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<sup>320</sup> J.H. Plumb, “The Historian’s Dilemma,” in Plumb, 26-30, 36. The Cambridge historian Sir John Harold (‘Jack’) Plumb was Snow’s colleague and friend, similarly schooled in the old liberal tradition. Over his long career he championed broader social history and its communication to wider, non-specialist audiences, thus mentoring today’s public (or ‘television’) historians.

<sup>321</sup> Plumb recalls Edward Albee’s play *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962), where the character of historian husband, George, cuts a similar figure. Plumb, 24.

<sup>322</sup> Ernest Gellner, “The Crisis in the Humanities and the Mainstream of Philosophy,” in Plumb, 78-79.

<sup>323</sup> Tew, 28.

then distinguished Cultural Studies from English and history. To contemporary observers like Anderson, this kind of critical cultural holism, heavily influenced by Marxism and socialism, seemed an important, if preliminary, step toward filling the 'absent centre' of British bourgeois society's image of itself.<sup>324</sup>

The first generation of cultural studies was united around an implicit agenda of rediscovering or reappropriating Englishness as identity and the construction of England as a minor culture (early British cultural studies concerned England and Englishness almost exclusively). There was an important shift involved in this post-imperial demetropolitanisation, from an imperial 'view from the top' universalism to a typically eccentric particularism, concerning a whole series of Little Englands. The mixed methodology of cultural studies offered models for studying British (effectively English) culture that retained rather than resolved the fundamental split between a longstanding cultural whole (the English model) and materialist social antagonisms (the Marxist model).<sup>325</sup>

Observers outside cultural studies were less convinced of the merits and import of the academic exploration of English ways of life. For the journalist and essayist Anthony Hartley – who, as arts editor of *The Spectator*, had commissioned Leavis's essay attacking Snow – the imperial dismantling and national consolidation in which cultural studies emerged "caused a narrowing of horizons and a sense of frustration in English society, which has been frequently, though not always consciously, expressed by English intellectuals."<sup>326</sup> Hartley saw the late 1950s discourse on culture and class as pointless leftist sentimentalism, showing an immodest expectation that academics would intervene, however secondarily, in the social state of affairs. To Hartley, intellectuals had a pastoral role "to give the nation the thought and ideas it deserves" but without committing Benda's 'treason of the intellectuals' and involving themselves practically.<sup>327</sup> Unsurprisingly, Hoggart took issue with Hartley, noting that he "particularly dislikes free-wheeling intellectuals who strike moral attitudes without recognizing the complexity of issues and the need

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<sup>324</sup> Anderson, 5, 50-56.

<sup>325</sup> Esty, 20-21, 183, 187.

<sup>326</sup> Anthony Hartley, *A State of England* (London: Hutchinson, 1963), 15

<sup>327</sup> Hartley, 244.

for compromise and maneuver.”<sup>328</sup> Hoggart and Hartley could not agree on the legacies of their common influences, Matthew Arnold and Orwell. However, they represented typical postwar reactions: Hoggart responded to ‘new affluence’ with liberal socialist tools, while Hartley reacted to the failure of 1930s liberalism, to imperial dismantling and to the welfare state, producing “a compendium of journalistic *idées reçues* on the matter of intellectuals from a period which... was formative for subsequent discussion.”<sup>329</sup>

A central claim of Collini’s *Absent Minds* is that the 1950s was a time in which the definition of the intellectuals in Britain was realigned. Reinvigorated by old perceived contrasts with continental Europe, the ‘nationalised’ definition of intellectuals in postwar Britain was closely related to a renewed identification with Englishness and with the ‘state of England’ questions. Two essays of the period were particularly influential: Noel Annan’s “The Intellectual Aristocracy” (1955) and Edward Shils’s short polemic “The Intellectuals” (1955). Both argued for the integration of British intellectuals into the ruling classes and social elites.<sup>330</sup> Annan and Shils presented a picture which, while true historically, soon became outdated in the wake of more radical positions, like those of Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn.<sup>331</sup> Anderson and Nairn’s thesis, that there was an absence of critical political intellectuals, became curiously influential in 1960s and 1970s Britain. In close examination the exceptionalism/absence thesis of British intellectuals crumbles: as Collini has argued, tropes of absence or denial of intellectuals appear in other cultures; foreign accounts see Britain as a hub of intellectual activity where intellectuals are prominent members of society; and in

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<sup>328</sup> Richard Hoggart, “Too Much Mustard,” *New York Review of Books* I, 11 (23 January 1964), 18.

<sup>329</sup> Thus, while of ephemeral influence, Hartley’s book is still instructive as a timely contribution. See Stefan Collini, *Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 165, see also 166-169.

<sup>330</sup> Noel Annan, “The Intellectual Aristocracy,” in *Studies in Social History, a Tribute to G.M. Trevelyan*, ed. by J.H. Plumb (London: Longman, Greens & Co., 1955), 243-287; Edward Shils, “The Intellectuals: (1) Great Britain,” *Encounter* 4 (1955), 5-16. See also Collini, *Absent Minds*, 140-150.

<sup>331</sup> Nairn’s is a later and more limited claim, but phrased in similarly ‘pathological’ terms. Tom Nairn, “The English Literary Intelligentsia,” in *Bananas*, ed. by Emma Tennant (London: Quartet, 1977), 57-83; see also Collini, *Absent Minds*, 175-182.

fact, as early as the 1920s many foreign accounts hold Britain together with France – its polar opposite according to exceptionalist accounts – to be enviably intellectual cultures. On the whole, then, there is no proof or agreement that British culture is uniquely unfavourable to intellectuals.<sup>332</sup> Yet the suggestion of the absence of intellectuals seemed reasonable in the wider context of British postwar popular culture.

## Culture and Tradition

One of the most influential intellectuals in interwar and postwar British culture was the economist and essayist John Maynard Keynes, a pillar of the Bloomsbury circle and standard-bearer for liberal humanism and socialism. Despite disenchantment with Bloomsbury ‘softness’ and its association with appeasement and defeat, Keynes’s postwar reputation continued to grow, particularly after his death in April 1946. He was recognised as an architect of the British postwar welfare state, as well as of the Bretton Woods system, the prevalent international economic order until the early 1970s. Keynes became aware of the earlier stages of imperial decline in the 1920s, and realised that it implied the end of an economic order for Britain. In his magnum opus, *General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* (1936), he reconsidered the British state and its vehemently *laissez-faire* economy.<sup>333</sup> The later adoption by the government of his proposals for state economic intervention to aid full employment was an economic manifestation of the broader shift from a diffuse cosmopolitanism figured through British imperial power to a closer-knit, consolidated nation-state figured in English cultural traditions (in the tradition of Arnold). To Keynes – and his was at the time a minority view – imperial decline did not reflect British national decline but was actually an opportunity for national redefinition and revival.<sup>334</sup> Unlike France, as the next chapter will show, Keynes’s embrace of decolonisation slowly spread among the postwar liberal left and, for utilitarian reasons, in official circles.

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<sup>332</sup> Collini devotes an entire chapter to these comparisons; Collini, *Absent Minds*, 201-220

<sup>333</sup> John Maynard Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1936).

<sup>334</sup> Esty, 170, 173, 181, 191-192, 215.



Keynes used his wealth and influence to promote artistic and broader cultural causes and projects. In 1945 he lobbied the new Labour government to create a sponsoring body for the arts in Britain that would enable the government to support them indirectly, 'at arm's length', thus mitigating the impact of government intervention. For this the government designated the existing Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA), a sponsoring body for arts practitioners, governed since its establishment in 1939 by Lord De la Warr, president of the board of Education. CEMA was renamed the Arts Council of Great Britain and was granted its first royal charter in 1945, with Keynes as its first chairman. In his short tenure Keynes established several lasting policies and precedents, later reinforced by a continuity of leadership: for example, its third chairman, Kenneth Clark, serving until 1960, had been a founding governor. Soon the Arts Council became the focus of a new cultural public policy.

A central intention of the new Arts Council's cultural policy was an ambition to present the working class with attractive, healthier alternatives to the pub; as such this public sponsoring of the arts was conceived as a medical and moral service *for* the people, rather than a service *of* the people.<sup>335</sup> The Council's paternalistic approach, typical of the evangelical side of Labour socialism, relied in part on the Arnoldian conception of culture as the replacement of religion and as the embodied spirit of the nation; this justified state intervention to mediate and defend national spirit, in a template already provided by Keynes. Turning CEMA into the Arts Council entailed a total reconfiguration of its system of sponsorship: occasional grants were replaced by ongoing patronage, implying the ongoing dependency of the sponsored; professional bodies purveying classical or 'high' culture were now preferred over amateur practitioners of popular, often

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<sup>335</sup> Geoff Mulgan, "Culture: the Problem with Being Public," *The Ideas that Shaped Post-War Britain*, ed. by David Marquand and Anthony Seldon (London: Fontana, 1996), 199, 201, 213. Above all other recurrent themes in the history of British cultural policy – *laissez-faire*, enhancing national prestige, economic benefits – Bennett highlights its 'civilising mission', particularly as a corrective to commercial popular culture; Oliver Bennett, "Cultural Policy in the United Kingdom: An Historical Perspective," *Cultural Policy and Management in the United Kingdom*, ed. by Oliver Bennett (Coventry: University of Warwick / Centre for the Study of Cultural Policy, 1995), 20-24.

regional, culture; and the works produced were intended to be sober and balancing rather than challenging or originally creative.<sup>336</sup> This custodial approach to the vessels of national spirit rendered Arts Council policy a retreat into preservation of 'heritage' and fetishisation of tradition; but since this policy was selective and elitist, it was in fact *creating* and imposing a national tradition, a unified, supra-regional ritual around the mythical image of English primordial collectivity. This normative approach to cultural provision and consumption might be compared with the Malraux policies introduced later in France, except that the Fifth Republic did not attempt indirect cultural management but typically retained its direct control. In Britain, as in France, this led to a popular linkage between social democracy, traditionality and elite concerns, a link that was also influential in other cultural arenas.<sup>337</sup>

In fairness, this image was largely true: Attlee's government was deferential toward tradition; British socialism had always been concerned with improving the working classes out of existence, economically and culturally; and the benefits of Labour policies were only felt throughout British society from the mid-1950s. The link tying traditionalism and elite concerns with Labour social democracy was neither necessary nor exhaustive, and the Conservatives also affected populist gestures: but if Labour promoted the 1951 Festival of Britain, the Conservatives preferred the 1953 Coronation celebrations. On the whole, British cultural policy in the first postwar decade was consistently didactic and elitist, offering the public responsible diversions.<sup>338</sup> The tendency toward 'high' culture was also apparent in other enterprises of the period, like the Edinburgh Festival (1947), London's Institute of Contemporary Arts (1947), the Aldeburgh Festival (1948), and a fourth body, probably the most publicly accessible, the BBC's Third Programme.<sup>339</sup>

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<sup>336</sup> Mulgan, 198-199, 201.

<sup>337</sup> Mulgan, 205, 212-213. Annan's anecdotal survey of the interconnection of British social, cultural and economic elites supports this.

<sup>338</sup> Keynes, for example, committed the Arts Council to funding the Royal Opera House (of which he was a trustee), and in 1948 its support still comprised more than 15 per cent of the whole arts budget. Mulgan, 201.

<sup>339</sup> Similar in purpose to the Arts Council, the British Council had been operating since 1934 and represented the British legacy of cultural imperialism. Yet until the late 1950s its postwar

The Third Programme started broadcasting in September 1946 and joined two existing radio services: the mainly informative Home Service, and the entertaining Light Programme; television was still limited to about 13,000 set-owning households. From the outset the Third Programme was intended as a haven for elite values, a tool for the self-improvement of the general public through arts broadcasts, many of them new commissions or continental productions, informed discussion programmes (mocked as “two dons talking”), and themed documentaries.<sup>340</sup> Whereas television was perceived as the vehicle and product of democratisation, the BBC intended the Third Programme for more specialist interests. It thus made some figures of otherwise limited appeal, like Isaiah Berlin and Dylan Thomas, into household names, as well as promoting the newly established cultural festivals.

However, nearly a decade later, the experiment was all but over. In 1957 the Third Programme was made to share its broadcasting hours with the more accessible Network Three; by 1970, it was officially extinct, replaced by Radio Three. The original pretext behind the establishment of the Third Programme changed: deference toward ‘high’ culture decreased, to be replaced by a more inclusive notion of high and low culture. The Third Programme also had enemies, ranging from the BBC’s founding chairman Lord Reith, who opposed the genre-based split of broadcasting, to Lord Beaverbrook’s *Daily Express*, which launched a public campaign to scrap it. Finally, in 1955, BBC monopoly over public broadcasting funding was broken with the establishment of the Independent Television Authority (headed by Lord Clark, simultaneously chairman of the Arts Council). Shrunk finances made the BBC more susceptible to external pressures on its policy and output, and the Third Programme, never particularly popular, was thus phased out.<sup>341</sup>

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activities were significantly reduced due to political (Cold War, Suez) and economic constraints.

<sup>340</sup> Sillitoe, for instance, credited the Third Programme with arousing his curiosity about high culture. *The Third Programme: High Culture for All*, BBC Production (aired on BBC Four, 25 October 2005).

<sup>341</sup> Asa Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom vol. IV: Sound and Vision* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 65-77.

Arts Council and Third Programme policies represent attempts to frame Britishness, or, rather, Englishness, through its *culture* – understood singularly and normatively – and through its *tradition*, taken as culture’s cumulative cache. The histories of the two institutions reflect concerted efforts to refashion the postwar idea of Britain into a positive new collective definition. Until the mid-1950s, these efforts were premised on the implicit belief that English ‘culture’ was already fully existent, an experience into which one was initiated by consuming its closed set of tropes and exemplars. This outlook pitted spontaneous, immediate everyday life against mediated and premeditated ‘culture’. Yet there were other, more immediate and spontaneous treatments of culture and tradition, which were perhaps more open to subjective interpretation and participation. The National Trust exemplifies that approach.

Since its foundation in 1895, the National Trust had aimed to preserve and protect sites of considerable beauty that were historically significant to ‘national heritage’ – a term the Trust effectively coined, using ‘national’ to mean ‘English’ (the Scottish National Trust was only established in 1931). The initiative for the Trust’s foundation and its slowly growing support reflected the *fin-de-siècle* anxiety about preservation, grounded in a growing concern among the educated classes for the future of traditional, rural England, threatened by modernity, industrialisation and urbanisation. Surveying the National Trust’s political history, the historian David Cannadine pointed out that “as the economic importance of the [English] rural world diminished, its cultural importance significantly increased” as the embodiment of moral decency and Englishness.<sup>342</sup> Late-Victorians and Edwardians such as Ruskin, William Morris and Hardy perceived modernity and in particular technology as eroding Englishness itself. Like them, the National Trust founders – Canon Hardwicke Rawnsley, Sir Robert Hunter and Octavia Hill – preferred the rural past to the urban present, and sought to preserve a countryside that they saw as beleaguered.

The National Trust (and its cult of rural, decent Englishness) gained popularity in the interwar years, benefiting from its collusion with the consensual

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<sup>342</sup> David Cannadine, “Conservation: The National Trust and the National Heritage,” *In Churchill’s Shadow: Confronting the Past in Modern Britain* (London: Allen Lane/ Penguin Press, 2002), 226.

politics and rural nostalgia for ‘spiritual values’ espoused by the Conservative Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin.<sup>343</sup> By the mid-1930s the Trust adopted a paternalistic rhetoric and policy, reflecting the landed interests massively represented in its governing bodies; from preserving rural, natural sites of ‘national heritage’ (and its ‘spiritual values’) the Trust turned to conserving country houses sold off by aristocrats because of mounting inheritance tax. The Country House Scheme completed the Trust’s slow transition from left-liberal, urban, middle-class civic mindedness to conservative, patrician interests.<sup>344</sup> However, the public face of the National Trust remained non-partisan and ‘national’ throughout, and by its fiftieth anniversary in 1945 it had been transformed into a mass organisation (while remaining structurally an oligarchy). As postwar affluence grew, the patrician hold on the Trust’s governance loosened, as did the Trust’s focus on conserving country piles and its invocation of endangered ‘spiritual values’. The countryside, or some convenient idea of it, was still appreciated, but popular interest shifted to the technology and modernisation that enabled Britain’s economic leap.<sup>345</sup>

The National Trust, the Arts Council and the Third Programme defined their roles in terms of custodianship and conservation of traditional elements of national culture, but only the National Trust saw its activities and popularity grow absolutely. This could be due to its voluntary nature, which made it somewhat more responsive to its popular membership; yet its fortunes and directions were mixed over its history. Of the three bodies presented, only the National Trust’s history extends back before the Second World War, giving some perspective to the history of national English cultural organizations as arbiters of ‘culture’ and ‘tradition’ in postwar Britain. Yet whereas the activities of the Arts Council and the Third Programme had future-oriented agendas, the *raison d’être* of the National Trust was the conservation of natural and built sites threatened with extinction. This extinction was perceived not as an inherent process of

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<sup>343</sup> Patrick Wright regards Baldwin’s *On England* (1926) as the *ur-text* of the vague, emollient, sensualist and non-rational view of English identity *qua* national heritage. Patrick Wright, *On Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain* (London: Verso, 1985), 82.

<sup>344</sup> Cannadine, 299-231, 235.

<sup>345</sup> Cannadine, 233, 235, 237. 243.

change but as the consequence of human neglect or corruption, an unwelcome degradation of the material past indicating cultural decline. Thus, the postwar National Trust became part of a wider trend to conserve 'heritage'. During the 1950s, as Raphael Samuel claimed, the cry of 'Heritage in danger' became a general reformist cause encompassing popular audiences and reflecting not so much Britain's economic decline as a recoil from sweeping postwar modernisation.<sup>346</sup>

The changing understanding of English heritage (or cultural essence) and its condition paralleled a similar transformation of British perceptions of social essence, 'the British way'. Here, too, the Second World War was a watershed, if only for the impression that it represented 'their finest hour'. Samuel suggested that the notion of the 'finest hour' was the product of a reformulation of 'the British way' during the interwar period, as the jingoistic nationalism of the Great War gave way to an anti-heroic, domestic and minor mode. A new staple of 'the British way' emerged to reflect this transformation: gardening, being inward-looking domestic cultivation, became an immensely popular pursuit during the 1920s and 1930s, partly also due to suburbanisation and the decline of domestic service. This grounded, staid image of 'the British way' animated 'their finest hour', the afterglow of which informed the postwar British self-image.<sup>347</sup> English heritage was recognised as the dependable wellspring of 'the British way' that sustained the nation during wartime.

The concept of 'heritage' was used flexibly in the mid-twentieth century British discourse on national identity. According to Patrick Wright, 'national heritage' essentially involves extracting the (potentially) significant past and redefining it as 'the historical', an object for generalised public attention that in its abstraction loses any political tension. Thus, ideas and objects of national heritage function as social mediators: 'the past' is there to be unearthed and visited, a quasi-archaeological tourism into another, vague and utopian world, offering seemingly neutral meaning to present lives. The 'heritage' perspective casts the past as an irreplaceable, threatened trust placed in our custody for

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<sup>346</sup> Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory vol. I: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London and New York: Verso, 1994), 243.

<sup>347</sup> Samuel, 218-220.

posterity, inevitably viewing history as entropic decline. Paradoxically, this perspective eternalises history by freezing it as an immobilised, foreclosed record of past achievements.<sup>348</sup> Wright suggested that the heritage orientation fosters 'neo-tribalism', a mythical image of a constantly threatened Deep Nation, founded on imagined participation, exclusive and primordialist, 'since time immemorial'. Invoking this 'neo-tribalism' replaces the contingency of existence with rightful necessity.<sup>349</sup>

Wright reacted to what he saw in the mid-1980s as a gross misrepresentation of the national past and its commercial exploitation for popular consumption. He claimed heritage had become a 'heritage industry' (a coinage after Horkheimer and Adorno's 'culture industry'), a strategy for maintaining social hegemony by lulling the masses into acquiescence.<sup>350</sup> Yet this strong opposition had its opponents: Samuel later called Wright's position conservative and snobbish intellectual 'heritage-baiting' in the name of radical politics. Its leitmotiv, the charge of 'vulgarity', echoed for Samuel Arnoldian prejudices against commerce and provincialism and Leavisite recoil from 'degraded' mass culture and consumerism. Samuel thought heritage was being attacked not because it was too historical, imprisoning the country in a time-warp, but because it was not historical enough: inauthentic but pretending to be real, and entertainment-oriented at the expense of education.<sup>351</sup>

Stefan Collini revisits several of Wright's points in his discussion of Pierre Nora's *Lieux de mémoire* project of a history of symbolism. Collini distinguishes between two concepts that Nora employs extensively, 'tradition' and 'memory'. To Collini, 'tradition' is lived in and not retrieved, constantly adapted at the expense of some amnesia, conferring the legitimacy of continuity on what is actually always in flux. 'Memory', then, is the willed attempt to recover and fix a source of significance perceived as endangered by oblivion, an attempt that presupposes discontinuity. This distinguishes a piece of memory, or a *lieu de mémoire* (site of memory) from history: memory is more self-conscious,

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<sup>348</sup> Wright, 69-70, 74-75, 78-79.

<sup>349</sup> Wright, 76, 83-85.

<sup>350</sup> See also: Robert Hewison, *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline* (London: Methuen, 1987).

<sup>351</sup> Samuel, 260, 265-267, 270.

reflexive and discordant, given to associations, allusions and symbols.<sup>352</sup> Nora claimed that the English have tradition while the French have memory. Collini considered Britain as afflicted with a National Trust model of political memory – whereby national literature and the ‘Whig history’ ideologically reinforce the English distinctiveness – leading him to suggest that the English have a ‘memory of tradition’, a deliberate incorporation of the past into current life so as to maintain a national consensus.<sup>353</sup>

Tony Judt goes even further, suggesting that the heritage industry shows the cultivation of “genuine nostalgia for a fake past” and the way things weren’t.<sup>354</sup> After all, as Davis defined it (in the introduction above), the past is the material but not necessarily the cause of nostalgia, which is the deliberate summoning of a past-to-remember. Sometimes, the contemplation of nostalgia becomes part of the nostalgic experience itself.<sup>355</sup> Affirming the past and contrasting it with the present, social nostalgia cultivates a sense of history from a sense of collective displacement, *creating* an image of the past by *conserving* its constituent elements.<sup>356</sup> The duality of continuity (of identity) and (real or imagined) discontinuity defines nostalgia – Wright’s ‘heritage outlook’ or Collini’s ‘memory of tradition’ – as auxiliary to larger mental and social processes constructing collective identity. In postwar Britain, through the distorting nostalgic reflection, the historical was turned into another symbolic mode, that of myth, through which the past was made to speak meaningfully to its postwar beholders – through heritage sites as through literary fiction.<sup>357</sup>

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<sup>352</sup> Stefan Collini, “French Contrasts: From the Panthéon to Poets’ Corner,” *English Pasts: Essays in History and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 44, 54-55.

<sup>353</sup> Collini, “French Contrasts,” 56, 65-66.

<sup>354</sup> Judt, 773.

<sup>355</sup> Davis, 1-9, 14, 17-27.

<sup>356</sup> Davis, 15, 34-35, 44, 50, 111, 115.

<sup>357</sup> Tew, 121-126; Connor, 135, 149.



## ***Anglo-Saxon Attitudes***

### Wilson in context

Angus Wilson's career exemplifies many of the themes and events discussed above. His play *The Mulberry Bush* (1956) inaugurated the Royal Court Theatre, only to be eclipsed shortly afterwards by *Look Back in Anger*. Wilson was consoled by the success of his second novel *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes* later that year. The novel reflected the change in the public image of historians and academics not long before the eruption of the 'Two Cultures' controversy and Plumb's 'crisis in the humanities'. In 1956 Wilson was already 43 and had just given up his position as librarian to concentrate on writing: his occasional work for media like the Third Programme convinced him he could live off his writing. However, he remained an oddly unplaced figure, not associated either with the interwar Waugh and Greene or with the Angries of the 1950s: he was a 'writer between generations,' loyal to a sensible, socially-oriented realism and urban, middle-class topics.<sup>358</sup>

Like the Angry Young Men, Wilson was outraged by British life in all its baselessly staid but unchallenged hypocrisies and structural anomalies. Looking back on the 1950s, he bemoaned the 'triple sins' of England – snobbery, intellectual dishonesty, and the cult of the expedient: the English had never needed to sharply define their liberal morality, he argued, and this rendered them intellectually poor, entertaining facile notions of 'the British way' like "backward-looking pastoralism" and an "excess of nostalgia" for rural virtue.<sup>359</sup> While unsentimental, Wilson's fiction until the mid-1960s reflected his nostalgia for the 1930s and a preoccupation with the social changes obliterating the old England he had known. He repeatedly portrayed the interactions of new social milieux with older social structures, taking both to manifest "the universal complexities of human experience."<sup>360</sup> Wilson's realism was of a different sort to

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<sup>358</sup> Shyam Sundar Agarwalla, *Angus Wilson and His Works* (New Delhi: Mittal, 1995), 117, 179

<sup>359</sup> Angus Wilson, "Introduction," in Edwin Smith, *England* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971), 10; Aruna Pandey, *Chaos and Order in the Novels of Angus Wilson* (Jaipur: Ritu, 1998), 1; Angus Wilson, "Fourteen Points."

<sup>360</sup> Pandey, 2.

that of the 'kitchen sink' novelists and he criticised them for producing flat fictional characters who confuse their social 'masks' for their true natures. Wilson characterised the fictional Angry Young Men and their notorious authors (e.g. Amis and Braine) as reactive types, who ended up nourished by the institutions and establishment they had attacked.<sup>361</sup>

Wilson was not only influenced by 1930s literary aesthetics but also by the political and ideological frameworks of the period, particularly the liberal humanism of the Bloomsbury set, whose influence was felt not only in interwar literary fiction and criticism (in E.M. Forster – what Bernard Bergonzi has called the foundational 'Schlegel-Wilcox opposition') but also, as we have seen, in economics and social planning (Keynes).<sup>362</sup> Wilson's understanding of the 'magical' power of art and literature was shaped by Bloomsbury sensibilities, as was his understanding of the novel as a liberal tool, presenting freedom as leading to (self-)understanding. But Wilson had witnessed what he called "a decline of liberalism in our time" in the futile political action of 1938 and the slip into violence and authoritarianism throughout the 1930s.<sup>363</sup> After the Second World War, and with a Cold War looming, the confidence of Bloomsbury liberalism had to be re-evaluated. Wilson saw his pessimism as "realistic"; and Bloomsbury self-confidence was now "a delusion."<sup>364</sup>

Like many other postwar writers Wilson was influenced by Leavis's idea of a Great Tradition. Indeed most overviews of the English novel for decades retained its "characteristically moral and prescriptive" tone. For novelists, the sense of a Great Tradition of accumulated influence bore heavily producing an

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<sup>361</sup> Agarwalla, 127; relying on Angus Wilson, "Diversity and Depth," *TLS* (15 August 1958), special section, viii.

<sup>362</sup> Bergonzi anachronistically uses Forster to understand Wilson. Bernard Bergonzi, *The Situation of the Novel* (London: Macmillan, 1970), 152; Agarwalla, 89.

<sup>363</sup> Agarwalla, 26; Brooke Allen, "The Mimetic Brilliance of Angus Wilson," *The New Criterion* 15, 2 (October 1996), 35.

<sup>364</sup> C.B. Cox, *The Free Spirit: A Study of Liberal Humanism in the Novels of George Eliot, Henry James, E.M. Forster, Virginia Woolf, Angus Wilson* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 121.

'anxiety of influence' of sorts.<sup>365</sup> Byatt suggests that Wilson's writing was a paradigmatic example of the Great Tradition's influence, in particular the work of George Eliot and Jane Austen.<sup>366</sup> But Wilson's literary studies extended beyond the Leavisite canon to Dickens, Zola and Arnold Bennett.<sup>367</sup>

Wilson liked what his biographer, Margaret Drabble, called Dickens's "intuitive radicalism" and "his refusal to patronise or sentimentalise."<sup>368</sup> To him, "the Dickens tradition" stood for a "worldly" wide social scope (a 'condition of England' writing), for an idealistic engagement with "socially responsible setting," and for creating characters who failed the benchmark of humanistic social relations.<sup>369</sup> Wilson also saw in Dickens a theatrical quality, one which allowed the implausible interconnectedness of diverse characters.<sup>370</sup> But most of all, "the Dickens tradition" promised Wilson a form of redemption through a belief in the Enlightenment ideal of universal freedom and equality as a moral

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<sup>365</sup> A.S. Byatt, "People in Paper Houses: Attitudes to "Realism" and "Experiment" in English Postwar Fiction," *Critical Essays on Angus Wilson*, ed. by Jay L. Halio (Boston, Mass.: G.K. Hall & Co., 1985), 170-171.

<sup>366</sup> Byatt, 172-175.

<sup>367</sup> For its broad social tableau, *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes* was compared by Rabinovitz to Eliot's *Middlemarch*. Bennett served to signal Wilson's early opposition to literary modernism, particularly to that of Virginia Woolf, whose essay "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" (1917) had criticised Bennett's use of overly detailed realism to capture character. Rubin Rabinovitz, *The Reaction Against Experiment in the English Novel, 1950-1960* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1967), 67, 71-72, 75-76. However, Dickens, Wilson's greatest influence, was only rehabilitated by Leavis and brought into the Great Tradition canon around 1970.

<sup>368</sup> Drabble also sees Wilson exercising Dickensian powers of exaggeration, caricature and mimicry, and using Dickensian expressionist violence as social display. Margaret Drabble, *Angus Wilson: A Biography* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1995), 371, 390-391.

<sup>369</sup> Wilson, "Diversity and Depth"; Michael Millgate, "Angus Wilson: The Art of Fiction," *Critical Essays on Angus Wilson*, ed. by Jay L. Halio (Boston, Mass.: G.K. Hall & Co., 1985), 44, 46. Reprinted from: Malcolm Cowley (ed.), *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews* (New York: Viking, 1959).

<sup>370</sup> Wilson in a 1979 interview: Jack Biles, "Some Worlds More, Some Years Later: A Talk with Angus Wilson," *Critical Essays on Angus Wilson*, ed. by Jay L. Halio (Boston, Mass.: G.K. Hall & Co., 1985), 63-64.

maxim.<sup>371</sup> Wilson accepted Orwell's 1940 reading of Dickens's fiction as bourgeois, informed by secularised, individualist Christian morals checked by 'good-tempered antinomianism'.<sup>372</sup> Wilson's study of Dickens also overlapped with another published in the same year, where Raymond Williams characterised Dickens's individual human drama and social situations as inescapably general, while also claiming that Dickens tried to convey clear social criticism without necessarily resolving the social problems his novels expose.<sup>373</sup>

Wilson thought his own irony and dark humour reflected Dickens's "extraordinary mixture of black and comic vision," his embrace of the profound and the ridiculous.<sup>374</sup> Wilson was praised by V.S. Pritchett for seeing England "with what looks like a foreign eye," critically but compassionately exposing previously ignored madness, morbidity and sourness over "years of austerity, black market, faded gentility – then a somewhat brash and uncertain recovery."<sup>375</sup> But more importantly, Dickens offered Wilson a version of humanism, more plausible than that of 1920s and 1930s liberalism.<sup>376</sup> The critique of liberal humanism was a major ambition of Wilson's fiction and criticism. Often he presents liberal humanists as preoccupied with individual redemption through cultivated critical examination, while remaining deluded and

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<sup>371</sup> Wilson's chronological study of Dickens's fiction by periods does not acknowledge Dickens's influence on him, which is amply available elsewhere. Angus Wilson, *The World of Charles Dickens* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1970).

<sup>372</sup> George Orwell, "Charles Dickens," *Inside the Whale and Other Essays* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1940), 81-85.

<sup>373</sup> Raymond Williams, "Charles Dickens," *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1970), 48-49, 51, 58.

<sup>374</sup> Angus Wilson, "Dickens and Dostoevsky," in *Diversity and Depth in Fiction: Selected Critical Writings of Angus Wilson*, ed. by Kerry McSweeney (London: Secker & Warburg, 1983), 87.

<sup>375</sup> V.S. Pritchett, "The World of Angus Wilson," *New Statesman and Nation* 199 (18 October 1957), 521-522; Pandey, x; Patrick Swinden, *The English Novel of History and Society, 1940-80: Richard Hughes, Henry Green, Anthony Powell, Angus Wilson, Kingsley Amis, V.S. Naipaul* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1984), 133.

<sup>376</sup> Jack Biles, "An Interview in London with Angus Wilson," *Critical Essays on Angus Wilson*, ed. by Jay L. Halio (Boston, Mass.: G.K. Hall & Co., 1985), 53. Reprinted from *Studies in the Novel* 2 (Spring 1970), 76-87.

ignorant of their own less pleasant aspects.<sup>377</sup> His three early novelistic protagonists (Bernard Sands, Gerald Middleton and Meg Eliot) were older humanists, being, like Wilson himself, relics from another time who felt that society was increasingly unsympathetic to their outdated ideals.<sup>378</sup> Wilson thus criticised liberal humanism from within, expressing a concern that it take into account the immanence of evil, suffering, loneliness and the frustration of most human aspirations.<sup>379</sup>

Wilson challenged not only the Bloomsbury set but also more conservative liberals, like Leavis. The fallacy of both Forsterian and Leavisite humanists, he argued, was their pessimistic tendency to simplify history and view modernity as fallen. This, he felt, misrepresented reality.<sup>380</sup> Wilson shared Leavis's and Forster's pessimism about contemporary humanism, but he argued that the fall was due to real, historical violence and authoritarian threats to it.<sup>381</sup> Wilson's liberalism was reanimated by an affinity to Dickens and the influence of Lionel Trilling (who in turn acknowledged Dickens).<sup>382</sup>

Wilson was also critical of the modernist reliance on subjectivity, and Virginia Woolf's 'too narrow' fiction was a favourite Aunt Sally.<sup>383</sup> Another mode of modernist escape from the modern West was out toward ancient or non-Western cultural sources – what was known as primitivism. This spatial and temporal construction of primitive alterity reflected, according to Marianna Torgovnick, the modernist longing for dissolution, and the image of the primitive – fixed because it was a projected, utopian fantasy – reflected anxieties about the fragility of modern identity. Ironically, the fetishistic rhetoric of the primitive

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<sup>377</sup> Swinden, 141.

<sup>378</sup> Cox, 123.

<sup>379</sup> Cox and others after him suggest the influence on Wilson of Trilling's *The Liberal Imagination*. Cox, 122-123; Pandey, 24, 36.

<sup>380</sup> Cox then discusses William Golding's fiction as a more recent humanistic accommodation of human evil. Cox, 171-172.

<sup>381</sup> Trilling also suggested in *The Liberal Imagination* that liberal humanism tends to oversimplify life by embracing the world as it is, uncritically; Wilson's *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes* is less extreme. Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1951); see also Padney, 24-25, and Cox, 4-6.

<sup>382</sup> Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination*, xi-xiii.

<sup>383</sup> Wilson, "Diversity and Depth."

remained Western and therefore controlling: the primitive was ultimately kept apart so it could be desired and exploited.<sup>384</sup> Wilson thought modernist primitivism was simply childish – both a great flaw and a covert attraction, as the treatment of its adherents in *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes* shows. Most importantly, modernist primitivism was similar to the traditionalist fetish of heritage, similarly pessimistic and with a conservative orientation: both fetishes kept the past as usable for present observers, as a basis for their criticism of the culturally degraded present. Both betray the fascination of culture not with alterity (be it primitive or ‘heritage’) but with itself.

Realising the affinities between literary modernism and literary traditionalism, Wilson eventually saw the absurdity of the realism/experimentation dichotomy so prevalent in the 1950s. Surveying postwar British realism Andrzej Gasiorek suggested this dichotomous view misrepresents the wide variety of authorial approaches and styles in both camps, and only contributed to what Byatt called “irritable territorial definitions.”<sup>385</sup> As Gasiorek put it, siding with realism at the time was akin to committing to “‘good old English tradition’ (empiricism, common sense, social comedy along the lines of Fielding and Dickens),” and to liberal humanism. The implication was that experimental writing was politically reactionary.<sup>386</sup> Wilson had always been wary of the vehement attacks on modernism, and his eventual change of heart led him to openly criticise apologists of traditional realism. In 1961 Wilson blamed both Snow and Leavis for helping perpetuate a literary climate unwelcoming to any form of writing outside traditional, moralistic realism. Both Snow’s and Leavis’s demands for ‘healthy’, ‘life-enhancing’ literature reflected to him a snobbish and dishonest attitude that needed to be purged from contemporary

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<sup>384</sup> Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 18, 172-174, 244-245.

<sup>385</sup> Gasiorek thus opposes influential accounts like that of Rabinovitz (1967). He also laments the historical condescension in casting early postwar realists as naïve and ideological, which renders later postmodernist reflection as “ironic, self-reflexive and detached.” Andrzej Gasiorek, *Post-War British Fiction: Realism and After* (London: Edward Arnold, 1995), 12-13; Byatt, 170.

<sup>386</sup> Gasiorek, 4-5. French *nouveaux romanciers* were regarded similarly, as the next chapter shows.

British letters. Wilson's public break with the literary traditionalists, some of them (like Lord Snow) his personal friends, was unequivocal, and showed his turn away from some of his own previous convictions.<sup>387</sup>

Even before this break, Wilson had tried to transcend the modernism/realism dichotomy. He shared Sillitoe's grumble about the tenuous, too-close-for-comfort relations that readers saw between fiction and reality, literature and society. "I do not care for exact realism," he claimed, adding "the tendency to confuse the novel with sociology seems to me the weakest aspect of modern English fiction."<sup>388</sup> Literary fiction may use realism to represent real-life events (as Wilson treated New Towns in his *Late Call*, 1964) but this does not make it documentary. Moreover, and this is a point Wilson shared with Dickens as well as with his contemporary Genet, *ad hoc* resolutions of narrative matters in fiction are not prescriptions for social matters in real life. This was the kernel of his newly disillusioned approach to literature and old realism. That attitude was best articulated across the channel, where Alain Robbe-Grillet was writing, "All writers believe they are realists... each one attempts as best as he can to create 'the real'."<sup>389</sup> Robbe-Grillet had already understood what Wilson was just coming to accept, that realism has no definitive theory but is merely a flag under which to rally; that the novel explores itself (as fiction) without attempting to express, inform or reform real life; and that the demand for 'healthy' literature was actually suffocating it.<sup>390</sup> While Robbe-Grillet (discussed further in chapter 4 below) addressed French literature, Wilson later noted he may as well have been

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<sup>387</sup> Angus Wilson, "If It's New and Modish Is It Good?" *New York Times Book Review* (2 July 1961), 1, 12; reprinted in McSweeney, 134-139; Rabinovitz, 65; Agarwalla, 33-34; Gasiorek, 97.

<sup>388</sup> Wilson responded to an unattributed critique by Raymond Williams and to Kermode's review of his *The Middle Age of Mrs. Eliot* (1958), where he claimed that Wilson's broad scope and keen observation had failed him in his task of making lifelike characters. Angus Wilson, *The Wild Garden, or Speaking of Writing* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992 [1963]), 137; Frank Kermode, "Mr. Wilson's People," *Puzzles and Epiphanies: Essays and Reviews 1958-1961* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), 193-197.

<sup>389</sup> Alain Robbe-Grillet, "From Realism to Reality," *For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1965 [Paris: Minuit, 1963]), 157.

<sup>390</sup> Robbe-Grillet, 157, 160-161, 167.

writing of British literature, which must have seemed even more old-fashioned to foreign eyes.<sup>391</sup>

The perceived rupture between older and newer modes of representation grew out of traditional realism's seeming inadequacy in reflecting social reality. While this was an entirely literary affair, many were inclined to see it as a symptom of a wider problem. Gasiorek was struck by "how persistently commentators linked the *crisis of the novel* with the *crisis of society*"; like Arthur Marwick, he suggests that a fear of national decline, an impression that Britain was falling behind the times, was pervasive and irrespective of political colours.<sup>392</sup> To Krishan Kumar, the 'crisis of the novel' reflected another aspect of the 'crisis of society': a decline in its power to offer through literary utopia an *imaginary* ideal, a model and *telos* for society. Kumar suggests several explanations of this crisis: the decline of Christianity as an inspiration for certain millennial and paradisiac expectations, both religious and secular; and the disillusionment with socialism (Mannheim's last Western utopia) and its redemptive prospects in its replacement by welfare capitalism.<sup>393</sup> British socialism was certainly a popular discontent, first for not delivering marked change fast enough, and then because change was so sweeping that it transformed British society. Finally, Kumar suggests that the 'crisis of the novel' reflects a 'crisis of society' because it reflects a crisis of social prospects, of a social horizon of expectations eroded by the retreat from the social in general. This he suggests was reflected in the novelistic plunge into the psychological, in absurdist resignation, and in the decline of literary utopian and anti-utopian visions beyond *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), which seem to fail to provide comprehensive ideas of hell or heaven on future earth.<sup>394</sup>

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<sup>391</sup> Biles, "An Interview in London with Angus Wilson," 50.

<sup>392</sup> Gasiorek, 5 (my italics); Arthur Marwick, *British Society since 1945* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), 274. Here again cultural pessimism is a common conclusion to divergent thought processes.

<sup>393</sup> Kumar, 420-421.

<sup>394</sup> Kumar, 421-422.



### Anglo-Saxon Attitudes in focus

In Wilson's fictional postwar society, the loss of faith in traditional institutions, even in marriage and family, was writ large; yet in their search for stability his characters remain drawn to those very institutions. They seem trapped in their sociality, between the two hellish poles Wilson defined as the self-pity and neurosis of the solitary self, and the human failure to communicate, precisely by aping communion in social activities that are in fact empty charades.<sup>395</sup> In *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes*, he conveys the modern predicament with familiar, sympathetic irony, leading one scholar to label the work a 'novel of compassion'.<sup>396</sup> The novel's title itself suggests the characters' absurd enjoyment of their moral convulsions – yet it also presents them as typical, almost part of English 'nature'. Indeed, Wilson thought his protagonist was important *only* in illustrating broader human and social situations, and intended the novel itself not to reform Anglo-Saxon moral attitudes but merely to portray them.<sup>397</sup>

Despite its convoluted plot, *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes* is a well-structured novel. The exposition is a series of interconnected scenes (similar to the expository structure of Genet's *Le Balcon*), introducing each character through their attitude toward medieval history and toward the protagonist, a leading medievalist of his day, 62-year-old Gerald Middleton. The nature of truth soon emerges as the novel's main theme; it is developed, seriously and comically, through various quests for truth, dramatically charged by the Wilsonian leitmotiv of a late crisis of consciousness in a life wasted to delusion.<sup>398</sup> Chief among those are Gerald's own quests after the truth of his relationships with his wife Inge, his lover Dollie, his children, his old teacher, his profession, and even (for his profession) historical truth itself, the past 'as it really was'. Gerald's quest for the truth, not least through flashbacks, is the main narrative drive of the novel. Central to the novel, and drawing in most of its minor characters, is an archaeological hoax in which Gilbert Stokesay, a modernist poet and son of

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<sup>395</sup> Wilson, *The Wild Garden*, 33; Padney, 22-23.

<sup>396</sup> James Gindin, *Harvest of a Quiet Eye: The Novel of Compassion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971); Cox, 121; Padney, xi.

<sup>397</sup> In this sense, Wilson and Robbe-Grillet were in agreement. Millgate, 46.

<sup>398</sup> This was also a dominant feature in Wilson's other early novels. Padney, 1; Agarwalla, 63, 147.

Gerald's mentor, places a pagan fertility idol in the excavated grave of Bishop Eorpwald. Gerald, the only surviving member of the dig, has kept quiet about the hoax for decades, helping perpetuate it as a misleading historical aberration.

Gerald's flashbacks illustrate his old behavioural pattern: an intellectual's evasion, retreating consciously into disillusioned quiescence.<sup>399</sup> Yet he looks back in order to move forward, and his flashbacks not only inform the reader but expose his past mistakes and compel him to 'exorcise' them. This exorcism unfolds over the second part of the novel, redressing Gerald's evasions, self-delusions and inertia, and renewing his appreciation of personal life and of historical scholarship. Wilson portrays this emotional journey unsentimentally: Gerald reclaims his past but cannot undo what is already done, and his attempts to 'correct' past mistakes are not always welcome. Some relationships (with his wife and children, with his lover, with most of his colleagues) have simply worn out or are too entrenched in the past. Here Gerald finds solace in his emotional buoyancy, which is rooted in his sensual nature, indicated by Wilson as a likely potential subversion of Gerald's moral preoccupations.<sup>400</sup> Wilson's irony renders morally ambivalent Gerald's increasing frankness and disregard for manners, as well as his secret pleasure in observing young women (like Elvira and the child Caroline), enhanced when he realises he is being a 'dirty old man'. This sensuality is portrayed as a *conatus* proper to Gerald, and it supports him through a tough transitional period late in life.

The novel's historians are a queer lot, as careerist as Snow's and almost as ridiculous as Amis's. The academic novel could now include characters such as the disillusioned Gerald and the desperate, idealistic Rose Lorimer. The character of novelist Clarissa Crane was also inserted to reflect the distinctions between history and fiction and the importance of each in representing the past.<sup>401</sup>

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<sup>399</sup> Agarwalla, 82; Arthur Edelstein, "Angus Wilson: The Territory Behind" in *Contemporary British Novelists*, ed. Charles Shapiro, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965), 145-153.

<sup>400</sup> Pandey, 46; Wilson, *The Wild Garden*, 34. Gerald's 'sensual' character is one of the clumsier points made in *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes*.

<sup>401</sup> Wilson also used the extra-narrative passages framing the novel to add 'impersonal' viewpoints on the hoax which have the authoritative air of historical records. *Anglo-Saxon*

The hoax is a rather direct gesture toward a modernist primitivism associated with D.H. Lawrence and Wyndham Lewis. The primitive paganism underlying England's Christian progressivism is highly recognisable in the figure of the protean, large-membered male idol, reflecting the primitivist fantasies of Gilbert. Rose Lorimer, too, delights in uncovering the 'conspiracy' of the assimilation of pagan elements into English Christian rituals, but she is also nostalgic for the simplicity lost in England's conversion. She becomes so involved in her thesis that her sanity hinges on it, and she, too, turns to male figures to ground her world – Professor Pforzheim, Gerald, and the key fertility idol. The last two turn out to be false idols. Finally, Wilson gently mocks notions of primordality: 'Englishness' is illustrated as merely the sum of preconceived notions about the English, either by themselves or by the numerous foreigners in the novel. As the hoax reveals, the Saxon past proves very hard to access directly, obscured as it is not just by material absence but by solid human fantasy.

In his long study of Wilson, Peter Faulkner suggests that *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes* is a self-conscious 'condition of England' novel.<sup>402</sup> Wilson's broad canvas and numerous characters, settings and temporal occurrences, together with the gesture toward the typical and representative in his title, all support Faulkner's claim. While being less political than Wilson's preceding novel, *Hemlock and After*, *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes* can also be read as a conflict between liberals and conservatives, a conflict that overlaps with a generation gap.<sup>403</sup> This casts the differences and mutual disapproval between Gerald and two of his children, John and Kay (and Kay's husband Donald), as another twist in the Whiggish narrative pitting liberals against conservatives throughout history. Here, however, it is the older Gerald who represents moral liberalism, while Kay and John, the younger, postwar generation are the conservative ones. Wilson suggested that "the old pre-war middle class Left... had... to share both in the triumph and the failure of Welfare England," but seemed out of touch with the

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*Attitudes* demonstrates the fickle nature of memory in both biography and history, its yielding to the facile, the convenient, and the self-affirmative. The novel also shows the relative nature of conceptions of truth, memory and history. Cf. Faulkner, 72-73.

<sup>402</sup> Peter Faulkner, *Angus Wilson: Mimic and Moralist* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1980), 70.

<sup>403</sup> Faulkner, 71; Rabinovitz, 88.

new realities of the 1950s.<sup>404</sup> Yet Wilson focused almost exclusively on his own class, generation, and ideology, which considerably narrowed the panoramic tableau he tried to convey.<sup>405</sup>

Conflicts between conservatives and liberals, between the old class structure and the setting of 'new affluence', between interwar and postwar generations comprise Wilson's impression of 'the condition of England'. This impression is informed by the juxtaposition of older and younger generations, borne out in the relations between parents and children, between grandparents and their grandchildren. This picture is also informed by several foreign characters – Inge Middleton, Marie-Hélène Middleton, Stéphanie and Yves Houdet, Professor Pforzheim – who reflect on English or Anglo-Saxon attitudes. Some foreign characters perform this function more straightforwardly, like Pforzheim, who acts on his many assumptions regarding the English way only to discover they are false; or Marie-Hélène, Gerald's daughter-in-law, who inwardly scorns 'lax' English ways from a French-Catholic outlook.

Despite the inevitable generation gap, there is no 'generational spirit' or *Zeitgeist* that unites characters: Gerald, Gilbert, Dollie, Inge, Stéphanie Houdet, and Arthur Clun are of the same age group and at roughly the same point in their lives, but this only emerges on second reflection. Still, the novel is mainly about them, who had been adolescents around the Great War, and who, *nel mezzo del cammin*, were thrust again into the Second World War, more devastatingly at a later age, and then faced the rapid postwar changes. These characters all look back nostalgically on their formative years in the 1920s and 1930s, projecting experiences onto their youth that reflect adversely on their later lives. Older characters, like Mrs. Salad (a Dickensian figure), Sir Edgar (a Snow figure), and Lilian display outdated demeanours and opinions. Younger characters, like Gerald's younger colleagues, his children and their partners, while in stride with the times, are still trying to establish their professional status (Stringwell-Anderson, Donald Consett) or their direction in life (Johnny, Elvira), if they are putting in the effort at all (Yves Houdet, Vin Salad, Larry Rourke). Gerald's

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<sup>404</sup> Wilson, *The Wild Garden*, 45-46.

<sup>405</sup> Tew, 51-52.

generation still commands the age, but it is undoubtedly slipping away from them.

Wilson presents the entire project of moral *Bildung* in *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes* unsentimentally. The narrative voice sometimes registers as contempt toward the characters: they are either self-deluded or irrational, and so they fail; or they strain at their own self-education, only to discover that it offers no redemption.<sup>406</sup> Indeed, the success that Gerald can claim for himself is his disillusionment and break with self-satisfaction and self-distrust.<sup>407</sup> Doing so has made him none the happier. This raises the general question about what Wilson regards as the ultimate motivation for the search for truth – a question that must remain unanswered. If truth hurts, its principled invocation seems more punitive or cruel than instructive. This reflects ambivalently on the self-knowledge maxim fundamental to liberal humanism.

Wilson presents Gerald as the exemplar of the lonely man, as the elementary unit of society, typically striving for personal freedom and the loosening of all social ties, a tendency evident in his turn away from society and the guarded approach to his emotional world. Thus, Gerald's initial non-interference in the Melpham hoax or in Inge's smothering upbringing of their children should be understood as a disavowal of his social and personal responsibilities as husband, father, lover and scholar.<sup>408</sup> *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes* can thus be read as the narrative of Gerald's slow assumption of his individual responsibilities to others and to himself, which breaks through his solitude and his image of social relationships as inherently unhappy "props and prisons."<sup>409</sup> This shift nevertheless leads Gerald to an impasse between Wilson's 'two hells'. He eventually must go through both to emerge in the end a seemingly happier man. Faulkner suggested that Gerald's ultimate happiness relies on the kind of gambit he makes. On the one hand, Gerald gains an inner freedom by facing what he had hitherto evaded, but he is left isolated from those closest to him: his wife, his three children, and his lover Dollie. On the other hand, he is thus left

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<sup>406</sup> Rabinovitz, 84.

<sup>407</sup> Swinden, 153.

<sup>408</sup> Judit Szabó-Pap, "The Lonely Man in Angus Wilson's Fiction," *Hungarian Studies in English* IX (1975), 96-98.

<sup>409</sup> Faulkner, 70; Cox, 141.

alone, which to Faulkner seems a positive outcome, considering Gerald's retiring temperament and hermit inclinations.<sup>410</sup> If he is happier like this, it is because he persisted in being true to himself, rather than because he was willing to transform in order to reform.

The cultural pessimism of *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes* might be further illuminated if we consider it as an example of what might be called a 'failure' story, or a story of exhaustion.<sup>411</sup> In a 1958 essay Thomas Munro presented a model of the Failure Story against the more familiar Success Story, largely discredited by the 1950s. The failure story, he argued, was more 'realistic' as it better reflected contemporary experience: "[T]he literary types which we are designating here as the 'failure story' and 'contemporary pessimism' are often described simply as 'realism' or 'naturalism.'"<sup>412</sup> 'Failurism', as Munro dubs it, relies on no specific, reasoned creed, and is more of a directionless or unfocused emotional outburst: failure is taken as rejection of success, progress or positivity by any standard, "reviling the symbols of authority, maturity, order, ability, conventional morality, beauty, and politeness."<sup>413</sup> At its darkest, this pessimism-as-realism reflects and rages against illusory success and the futility of human efforts toward any constructive goal. Yet 'failurism' goes beyond nihilism and unhappy endings; the literary model is variable and its tropes differ regarding the depth of misery experienced, the scope of the tragic sense of life, the degree of failure's inevitability or the extent of assumed human corruption. The drama of the failing protagonist usually regards the futility of efforts to find a place in the world, or disillusionment with reformatory ideals by which to live.<sup>414</sup> The failing protagonist, says Munro, is "characteristically undistinguished, petty, weak, and often contemptible," and his actions are often misguided, reflecting his foolishness in thinking his ideals worthwhile, striving too hard for the wrong

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<sup>410</sup> Faulkner, 70.

<sup>411</sup> Munro's contemporary article defines the 'failure story' and, while never gaining currency, is still a useful interpretive tool. Thomas Munro, "The Failure Story: a Study of Contemporary Pessimism," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, XVII, 2 (December 1958), 143-168.

<sup>412</sup> Munro, 161.

<sup>413</sup> Munro, 154, 156, 162.

<sup>414</sup> Munro, 145, 148-150.

things (being externalities rather than spiritual values).<sup>415</sup> His ultimate failure, however minor, is part of a broader picture of futile efforts and senseless experience.

It would seem that Gerald is more of a failure protagonist than *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes* is a great 'failure story'. While not petty and contemptible, Gerald is rather undistinguished: he is too weak to face himself and others around him, or to face the basic truths about his life; in private life he is not the most charming man, nor is he a great husband, lover or father; professionally he approaches retirement without notable achievements or discoveries, a school of student followers, or positions of influence acquired by more than sheer seniority. The precious little he acted in his life seems to have been misdirected: breaking up with Dollie to marry Inge; then cheating on Inge with Dollie; keeping silent over Gilbert Stokesay's hoax and allowing its perpetuation as an historical aberration. The consequences of his reform are themselves not encouraging: his hope to restore warm family ties with his estranged wife and children is dashed and he ends up estranging them further; Dollie refuses to take him back and Elvira is a hopeless new object of his affections; his silence over the Melpham fraud is regarded as regrettable, even suspicious, and loses him the appreciation of his more principled colleagues, like Rose Lorimer. Gerald's story seems particularly bleak and pessimistic in that both his efforts and his inactivity are represented as futile. He is ultimately helpless against the power of circumstance: his realisation of his past errors has come too late in life for his corrective efforts to be significantly successful. His acknowledgment of this is not tragic but rather reflects a resignation to the frustration of his efforts, which yielded only a clearer conscience and a greater sense of certainty.

The nihilism lacing Wilson's pessimism in the novel seems benign. Humanist values are presented as worthier than others, but not as absolutely superior, and the limitations to the redemptive prospects they can offer seem clearer. The ironic narrative is generally cheerful, even amusing, and does not end terribly or sadly, suggesting Gerald's journey has ended not with great catastrophe or tragedy but 'only' with failure. Gerald is no more miserable than when he is first encountered, and the reader soon realises he rather cherishes his

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<sup>415</sup> Munro, 145-146.

maudlin, even morose 'attitudes'. His emotional ineptitude in his dealings with other people prevents any major tragic sense of experience: in a way, Gerald's initial emotional failings preserve him. He is not a bad person and the failure of his efforts was not necessary, but perhaps his *sense* of failure was limited by the vagueness of his expectations from his late reformation. The habitual, inert persistence of conditions and people in their ways is figured merely in the diffuse image of 'what has been, so it shall be'. Here is no Camus or Beauvoir, no Faulkner or Mann or Sinclair Lewis, certainly no Eliot or Orwell (all Munro's examples), but a pessimist whose morose sense of reality is rooted in an undeceived disillusionment, an author and narrator who is a frustrated optimist. The narrative of *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes* is the obverse of a Success Story, yet success, through its lack, still defines the novel as its frame of reference.



## Chapter 4: French Trauma and After

The wartime trauma of occupation and the shame of collaboration left their mark on French public affairs and private lives. Especially problematic for a nation that defines itself by modern universal principles and abstract notions, France's postwar reconstruction presented the challenge of containing and transforming the material legacy of humiliation and division. The challenge of creating a regenerated, proud France unavoidably involved, as in Britain, redefining the French nation-state independently of its shrinking empire and, to a degree, a separation from its past. This re-telling of the French story also provoked some literary reactions.

Reformulating France's national identity essentially required recovering a sense of continuity with glorious elements of its past, in which it was living up to its constitutive ideals, and carefully editing more problematic elements to mask some internal contradictions. Regarding the occupation, France was (and probably still is) afflicted by what Henri Rousso dubbed 'the Vichy Syndrome', which was itself dominated by versions of the Gaullist myth of near-universal resistance.<sup>416</sup> Another failingly managed contradiction was that of French colonial rule, especially in Algeria, clearly elucidated by Sartre before the 1958 referendum that returned de Gaulle to power. Essentially, the mystification of France and Frenchness was a construct meant to naturalise the colonial and Gaullist orders.

Things were changing in postwar France, but not all cultural production went along with the convenient misrepresentation of past and present. Younger, less established writers, all of whom coincidentally were published through the resistance symbol *Editions de Minuit*, tended to see the postwar situation as new and requiring new modes of literary, critical and cinematic representation. This chapter will consider the theoretical writings of three *nouveaux romanciers* who conveyed their visions for this new writing, and Barthes's essay *Critique et vérité*, which set out his idea of a new reading. These, and the French fears about

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<sup>416</sup> Henri Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944*, trans. by Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1991), 10-11.

continuity of identity, will be discussed in conjunction with the screenplay for *Hiroshima mon amour*, a film drawing analogies between the French occupation trauma and the Japanese nuclear catastrophe, made by Marguerite Duras and Alain Resnais, two of the most challenging new postwar artists.

## French fears

Stefan Collini is mentioned in the last chapter as suggesting that the English have a 'memory of tradition', while the French have a 'tradition of memory', a habitual self-conscious reference to the significance of things past, in order to legitimate with continuity an otherwise changing national face.<sup>417</sup> The nature of this continuity is as sensitive an issue as the premise of constructed national narratives, and without it any progress is only regarded as temporary and piecemeal, part of a larger, pessimistic picture of decline.<sup>418</sup> The traditional national imaginary persisting in postwar France figured nationality in primordialist terms, springing from ancient sources of collective history in common territory. It also had to deal with two major crises of identity: the legacy of wartime experiences (the 'strange defeat', collaboration, occupation, the advent of the nuclear age) and the prospect of imperial dismantling (compounded by colonial wars, the Cold War, and increased dependency on American aid). Gaps in the collective memory of these two elements disrupted the picture of French greatness and progress, introducing uncertainty, fracture and fears of national decline. Later, the recovery of these gaps and absences became part of the reconsideration of historical narration and memory typical of the historiographic turn of the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>419</sup>

Reshaping French collective memory was part of an earnest effort to regain confidence in the French state and the republican idea; in France as nation,

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<sup>417</sup> Collini, "French Pasts," 54-56.

<sup>418</sup> Bennett, *Cultural Pessimism*, 9.

<sup>419</sup> Admittedly, the *Annales* school of historians (e.g. Febvre, Ariès, Braudel, Le Roy Ladurie) sits uneasily with this broad suggestion. However, with its stress on broad social and economic histories of *longues durées* and mentalities, and with Febvre's understanding of historical enquiry as problem-directed, the *Annalistes* still influenced the way history in general (if not recent French history) was perceived.

both uniquely particular and the epitome of universal humanistic values; and in France as a righteous people who could prosper once more. This was compounded by France's struggle to reassert its position as a colonial empire under the combined pressures of maintaining empire and the West's position in the Cold War. Losing Indochina in 1954, France now faced a rapidly spreading nationalist rebellion in Algeria, which the *colons* and the military garrison that supported them tried to suppress. The Algerian war highlighted a fundamental paradox in France's narrative of its recent history. Only when levelled in *universalist* terms could wartime suffering and resistance become constitutive of the new French collective identity: even returning camp survivors were told that 'we too have suffered.' Yet the French also clearly regressed into older, *particularist* arguments justifying French colonial rule and supporting harsh measures to maintain it. More than a practical confusion, this was an ideological struggle between universalist humanism, seeing liberty and equality as essential to human existence – and an amalgam of French nationalism, metropolitan racism and traditional colonialism. The Algerian problem divided French society and threatened to throw the French polity into greater turmoil. It was certainly the fault line ending an initial period of national unity narratives: as the historian Henri Rousso noted, in the first postwar decade the fight against the Germans was portrayed as an all-encompassing struggle against foreign oppression, regardless of political colours – that is, as 'resistantialism'.<sup>420</sup> The start of the Algerian uprising in 1954 ended initial resistantialism, and its later mishandling was a major factor in the Fourth Republic's collapse and the Gaullist restoration.

The Fourth Republic's uncompromising line over decolonisation regarded anything less than the demonstration of imperial fortitude as a symptom of imperial decline – a surprisingly aggressive, reactionary approach from an otherwise liberal succession of centrist coalitions, also responsible for the

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<sup>420</sup> Rousso differentiates between 'resistantialism', as active opposition to the Occupation, and 'resistancialism', specifically related to membership of the *Résistance* and conferring privileged status within the struggle for liberation. Rousso sees 'resistancialism' as definitive of the second stage (1954-1971) of French public remembrance of the Occupation, constructing the *Résistance*, identified with the nation as a whole, as an alternative object of memory to Vichy. Rousso, 10-11.

Monnet plans and for promoting European integration.<sup>421</sup> Imperial dismantling had always been a sensitive issue, touching French fears and insecurities over loss of space and of imperial identity. Martin Shipway suggests that the French ‘official mind’ stressed imperial continuity as a reassurance in the face of defeat and decline, and that the persistence of colonialist rhetoric and propaganda (assisted in Algeria by strict control of news reportage) also obstructed the development of popular attitudes reflective of France’s colonial role.<sup>422</sup> But more than other colonial struggles, Algeria had in it the makings of a crisis. In nationalistic French fantasy, France was one empire straddling two continents: the Hexagon in Europe and Algeria in Africa, with the Mediterranean *mare nostrum* running through it. Administratively, too, Algerian *départements* were an integral part of the French metropole, and so privileged over other French colonies *d’outremer*. Mendès-France’s decision to concede Indochina in order to keep Algeria and other African colonies rendered them a final French frontier. A decision on Algeria’s sovereign and identity was perceived as a decision on French sovereignty and identity.

This was a popular view of the Algerian situation, but it was not the only one. On 23 January 1956, Sartre addressed a rally for peace in Algeria at the Salle de Wagram in Paris, and this address, later published in *TM*, became a definitive document of French anti-colonialism in the following years.<sup>423</sup> In “Le Colonialisme est un système” Sartre sought to clarify the political and economic workings of colonialism, and to expose the ‘neocolonialist mystification’ misleading the general public: the facile abstraction of politics into nationalist and imperialist imagery obscured the material reality of the colonial system and the human agents that sustain it.<sup>424</sup> The worrying symptom was not the presence

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<sup>421</sup> Kedward, 372.

<sup>422</sup> Martin Shipway, “La Décolonisation: une exploration à rebours ?” *La Chouette* 31 (2000), 2, 16-17.

<sup>423</sup> “Le Colonialisme est un système,” *Les Temps Modernes* 123, March-April 1956, later collected into his *Situations V* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964). All quotations here from the English translation: Jean-Paul Sartre, “Colonialism is a System,” in Sartre, *Colonialism and Neocolonialism*, translated by Azzedine Haddour, Steve Brewer and Terry McWilliams (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 30-47 (henceforth: Sartre, “Colonialism”).

<sup>424</sup> Sartre, “Colonialism,” 30-31.

of bad *colons* in Algeria, but the fact that, since 1830, it was still colonised by the French at all. The Algerian problem was not neo-colonialist but old-colonialist because, contrary to French universal humanism, it was supplemented by popular racism which dehumanised the Algerians and thus denied them their human rights.<sup>425</sup>

Standing at the heart of the colonial system, the *colon* was distinguished by function and by interests from the metropolitan Frenchman and from the Algerian. Sartre saw relations between *colons* and Algerians as taking place only through their mutually constitutive roles (coloniser/colonised) on the two sides of colonialist-racial difference. But while *colons* and Frenchmen alike benefited from the colonial system, they were not the same: *colon* economic interests contrasted with France's political interests, but their allegiance was split between homeland (France) and country (Algeria). Sartre thought that the colonial system had become self-destructive, and that France was caught in the fold: "colonialism obliges France to send democratic Frenchmen to their deaths to protect the tyranny that the anti-democratic colonialists exert over the Algerians."<sup>426</sup> *Colon* intransigence led Algerians to despair of reforms and opt for armed revolt. Sartre suggested that the French arrive at similar conclusions, as colonialism "is our shame... it infects us with its racism... Our role is to help it to die... wherever it exists."<sup>427</sup>

Another critique of colonialism and racism, linking it with French nationalism, was articulated in Barthes's *Mythologies*. The Algerian war was at the background of the book, where Barthes famously unpicked mythical and semiotic elements in French colonialist rhetoric and imagery (like the Black African soldier saluting the *tricolore*). Barthes noticed other nationalistic epiphenomena, like the seemingly benign symbolism of cleanliness and purity in soap and detergent advertisements, which to him was akin to the moral laundering of terms regarding the Algerian situation, kept largely hidden from metropolitan France. Similarly, French culinary rudiments like wine and *steak-frites* were more than *nourriture terrestre*; they were a nationalised 'totem

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<sup>425</sup> Sartre, "Colonialism," 31-32, 45.

<sup>426</sup> Sartre, "Colonialism," 44-46.

<sup>427</sup> Sartre, "Colonialism," 47.

*vivace*' that sustained one's sense of Frenchness (*Francité*), thus turning mystified foodstuffs into agents of social cohesion.<sup>428</sup>

Barthes paid particular attention to the stationer-turned-deputy Pierre Poujade and his movement, UDCA (*Union de défense des commerçants et artisans*).<sup>429</sup> Formally, Poujade represented the interests of some 2.3 million rural shopkeepers, petty merchants and artisans, who in 1955 voted 52 Poujadists into the Chamber of Deputies. UDCA supporters felt disenfranchised by the fast-growing French corporate capitalism, urbanisation and retail chains offering cheaper, mass-produced goods. Poujade and UDCA reclaimed their ground by representing themselves as *la vieille France*, meaning not just the pre-war economic order, but also a world Empire ruled by a primordially-defined Gallic nation. Through Poujadism the petty-bourgeois cause of shopkeepers allied itself with colonialism in public demonstrations (from January 1955) and by holding the UDCA national congress in Algiers in 1954.<sup>430</sup> Appealing to 'old French' values, Poujadism replicated an old ideological pattern, familiar from the Dreyfus affair and most of interwar politics: casting its xenophobia, racism and pro-colonialism as basic patriotism, its envy of Capital as care for the 'little man', and its anti-intellectualism as 'common sense'. In so doing Poujadism opened the door for the relegitimation of other shades of right-wing conservatism. Significantly, this coincided with the actual rehabilitation of some Vichy figures in government and the civil service by the mid-1950s.

Barthes saw the historical repetition of a familiar ideological pattern as ominous, a '*thème maléfique*' that multiplied itself synchronically (as with the American preacher Billy Graham) as well as diachronically. To Barthes, Poujade's ontology was closed and immanent, and a world of 'little people' with material 'common sense' that relied on a quantitative calculus and resisted any qualitative difference. This resistance sustained an anti-intellectualism which portrayed the 'professors' in mythical terms as detached and rootless individuals, lazy and idle (intellectuals *do nothing*), whose excess of intellect made them into thinking machines, lacking in human soul and savvy (*roublardise*), disgraced by

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<sup>428</sup> Barthes, *Mythologies*, 85-86, 88-89; Lavers, 82.

<sup>429</sup> "Quelques paroles de M. Poujade" and "Poujade et les intellectuels", in Barthes, *Mythologies*, 96-98 and 205-212 respectively.

<sup>430</sup> Kedward, 377-378.

their own lack of prowess which thus separated them as degenerates from the healthy, Poujadist French race. Culture to Poujade was a malady, a foreign element to be resisted, and this refusal of alterity was to Barthes approaching fascism.<sup>431</sup> Poujadism went far beyond Poujade himself: tapping into Romantic sentimentalist traditions it amounted to a general hatred of ideas, intellectual culture and critical scrutiny. It identified 'real' France in the great French quantity, the strong vulgar mass of Gauls grounded in their provinces. Therefore, by some reverse Decadent outlook, Paris became in the Poujadist outlook the locus of all French vices: the sadistic establishment, the fatigued, alienated intellectuals in their Left Bank cafés, and the literal and metaphorical head down from which, Poujade believed, the fish rots.<sup>432</sup>

From the critical outlooks of Sartre and Barthes emerges a picture of systemic contradictions plaguing French society, known to most French through their symptoms and fault lines: Vichy, Indochina, Algeria, Poujade. These symptoms are bound together into one system of incongruent values of Frenchness. Attempts to resolve French crises were portrayed, not least by Sartre and Barthes, as struggles for the future face of France as a synthetic collectivity – a republic and a people, a state and a nation. Essentially, as the historian Pascal Ory claimed, old French culture and politics were devastated in the 'strange defeat' of 1940 and never recovered.<sup>433</sup> Ory's insistence on the historical *discontinuity* of French culture and politics taps into broader concerns for continuity: the left-liberal tradition of the short-lived Front Populaire government and the Third Republic's typical radicalism; the continuity of traditional French nationalism and monarchism; the traditional link to the universal humanistic values that had informed the revolution; and the ongoing deference to certain symbols, customs, social and political institutions. While many of these ostensibly survived the Second World War, they or the public perception of them were transformed in the wake of changing circumstances and the growing fragmentation of changing French society.

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<sup>431</sup> Barthes, *Mythologies*, 96-98, 205-210.

<sup>432</sup> Barthes, *Mythologies*, 211-212.

<sup>433</sup> Pascal Ory, *L'Aventure culturelle française* (Paris: Flammarion, 1989), 9.

Ironically, the Fourth Republic was effectively undone by elements linking it with the interwar period: immutability with regard to the crumbling empire, and toleration of extreme ideologies.<sup>434</sup> As its popularity eroded, its vocal critic de Gaulle seemed to offer a majority of the French a viable alternative. Since 1946 the General was leader of the opposition party RPF until resigning this role in 1953 in desperation at the surprising stability of centrist politics despite frequent changes of government. The five years of his '*traversée du désert*', ending in his triumphant return in 1958, allowed him to write his war memoirs and have his own authoritative say; in so doing, he fully exploited his imposing image as the almost mythical saviour of France, towering (in height as in prestige) over any other resistance leader, and played up his historical role and grand prospective vision.<sup>435</sup>

The General's version of the events from 1940 to 1944 was the basis for what was known as 'Gaullism'. In this narrative most French had resisted the Occupation and Vichy was a minority of misguided wrongdoers; it was the Germans (or their direct collaborators) who had perpetrated the 'real' crimes of the Occupation. More grandly and symbolically, the Resistance represented French continuity as a republican regime and a patriotic nation, whereas Vichy's paternalistic authoritarianism was an aberration. This story cast de Gaulle as the supreme head of all resisters and thus as saviour: his role and the role of the resistance had been to bring on the (self-)liberation of the French, and so to preserve national honour.<sup>436</sup> The Gaullist myth (for so it was) relied heavily on the abstraction that cast the Nation, the Resistance and the State as agents independent of their constituent parts: Frenchmen and Frenchwomen, the *résistants* themselves, and the French Republic as a corporate, bureaucratic polity. The Gaullist myth itself existed as an abstraction, an idea in the minds of people that had pre-existed de Gaulle's return to power, an idea so effectively diffused that around the mid-1960s it seemed to take on its own independent

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<sup>434</sup> Kedward, 382.

<sup>435</sup> Likewise, when voted out of office in 1945 Churchill turned to his memoirs, partly under pressure to counter an unfavourable account already published by Roosevelt's son and adjutant. See David Reynolds, *In Command of History: Churchill Fighting and Writing the Second World War* (London: Penguin, 2005 [2004]).

<sup>436</sup> Rousso, 71-72; Stanley Hoffmann, "Introduction," in Rousso, vii-ix.



existence, allowing many to subscribe to Gaullism while critical of the President himself.<sup>437</sup>

The Gaullist myth offered the French a renewed sense of continuity and cohesion, rescuing the positive image of French national identity as progressive. If Vichy was an historical aberration, the timeless spirit of France-as-liberty was maintained elsewhere, going on to triumph and return, first abortively in the Fourth Republic, then victoriously in the Fifth Republic. However, the Gaullist stance was not unproblematic: it expropriated the narration of the past from many people who had experienced it themselves, like the *résistants*. Moreover, the myth's glorified resistancialist element came at the expense of utterly vilifying Vichy and people implicated in it. This led to what Rousso dubbed the 'Vichy Syndrome' – a post-traumatic phenomenon, a 'neurosis' relating to the Occupation – and linked internal divisions, encompassing several symptoms, all identified by "the patent topicality of a reference to the past."<sup>438</sup>

The past is summoned to inform present identity through personal (private) memory, collective (public) memory and (scholarly) history, and it is not always the rationally-structured scholarly exploration that is predominant. Indeed, the journalist Alain Duhamel has recently argued that legitimate French fears, feeding off French expectations and experience, all lead to suspicions of the disintegration of French identity; thus they are as *constitutive* of French identity as the positive elements on which they supervene. "Behind all other fears lurks naturally the old fear of history, belief in decline," claimed Duhamel, but this is but one of three aspects of disruption informing French cultural pessimism.<sup>439</sup> Firstly, as suggested above, the fear of breakdown of national-historical *continuity* is a key element in a nation's perception of its place in history. The rupture around the *années noires* needed to be artificially bridged over, and the Gaullist myth contributed to this end.<sup>440</sup> A second disruption is to a sense of national *cohesion*, concerning the nation's persistence as collective subject, 'one and indivisible'. Social cohesion is reinforced and transgressors of

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<sup>437</sup> Rousso, 82, 97.

<sup>438</sup> Rousso, 10-11, 303-304.

<sup>439</sup> Alain Duhamel, *Les Peurs françaises* (Paris: Flammarion, 1993), 15, my translation.

<sup>440</sup> Both Duhamel and Ory identified this as pessimism, not as a real threat. Duhamel, 15; Ory, 231.

the collective narrative face delegitimisation of them and their memory for threatening national difference. The third aspect of experience which, when disrupted, contributes to cultural pessimism is the sense of *safety* and *limits*, of definiteness through definition, and of preservation of difference through exclusion.

De Gaulle was a master of elisions between rhetorical and ontological entities, which allowed him to gloss over the three kinds of disruption suggested. Appropriating Resistance legacy since the Liberation, de Gaulle propagated a vision of France in which he was both Saviour and embodiment. After becoming president, this relation between de Gaulle and France was elaborated. As head of State, de Gaulle was the personification of France as State and of Frenchness as identity: the Nation, however, was an earthly incarnation that needed to be led, a role tailored to the size of de Gaulle. Nevertheless, there was an intrinsic bond between the President and the People, evident in his oft-used term *rassemblement*, denoting togetherness, rather than the more common *parti*.<sup>441</sup> The rhetorical generation of such a surprisingly rich metaphysics of *Francité* – the State, the Nation, the People, ‘Frenchness’ – served a partisan (personal or political) agenda, but was also an occultist mythology, concerning (indeed, generating) an elusive but constant entity which in its various guises was above all a unity, persisting through the numerous political changes in French history. Its purpose was to convey the continuity of an otherwise contingent, synthetic entity – the French Republic – pegged loosely on a constantly changing French society, naturalised by the rhetoric of unity as an essence, a given absolute.

De Gaulle’s rhetoric of French grandeur through continuity made him a popular opposition to the crumbling Fourth Republic, which was increasingly seen as aberrant. However, throughout the 1950s he had a vocal critic in Sartre, who saw him as the spectre of legitimised reactionary militarism, and sharpened his criticism of the political heir-apparent. This peaked in the weeks preceding the September 1958 constitutional referendum, when Sartre published in the new left-wing weekly *L’Express* two essays on French society in crisis, on the eve of

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<sup>441</sup> Kedward, 389, 391.

restructuring its polity: “The Constitution of Contempt” and “The Frogs Who Demand a King.”<sup>442</sup>

Sartre saw the French as facing a false choice between a defunct (Fourth) republic or a future (Gaullist) monarchy: the effectively crippled Fourth Republic was an unrealistic choice, focusing expectations on its alternative, which was not a programme but de Gaulle the man, promising a Fifth Republic in his image. De Gaulle’s popularity worried Sartre because it signified the French public’s political abstentionism when faced with tough decisions and a dead-end polity: by following a charismatic father figure, who for long had been pronouncing in the name of France, they were relinquishing rationality and responsible choice for what Sartre saw as childish idolatry.<sup>443</sup> Here Sartre returned to a point he had made in “Colonialism is a System,” framing the inherent contradiction in ‘Gaullist republicanism’ between universalism and particularism: “sick and tired of the ineffectual, our apolitical republicans are saying ‘yes’ to the irrational, to the sacred and by the same token saying ‘no’ to equality.”<sup>444</sup> What was worse, De Gaulle was the popular choice but was also clearly partisan, owing his renewed prominence to collusion between interested elements in France and Algeria: reactionary metropolitan farmers, the Algerian colonels, and the winners of French colonialism – Parisian capitalists and Algerian landowners.<sup>445</sup>

The most interesting aspect of Sartre’s two essays was his post-mortem of the Fourth Republic and of recent French society, again extending his anti-colonialist speech of 1956. The Fourth Republic was a wretched political system which in the name of continuity and stability had become stagnant: the same government rotating among the same people, relying on the same majority and choosing to do nothing about the colonial crisis. Popular contempt for parliamentarians enhanced de Gaulle’s image as the expedient man of action who

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<sup>442</sup> “La Constitution du mépris,” *L’Express* 378 (11 September 1958); and “Les Grenouilles qui demandent un roi,” *L’Express* 380 (25 September 1958); both quoted here from Jean-Paul Sartre, *Colonialism and Neocolonialism*, translated by Azzedine Haddour, Steve Brewer and Terry McWilliams (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 88-95, 96-119 respectively (henceforth: “Constitution” and “Frogs” respectively).

<sup>443</sup> Sartre, “Constitution,” 91, 93-95; “Frogs,” 96, 114.

<sup>444</sup> Sartre, “Frogs,” 114.

<sup>445</sup> Sartre, “Constitution,” 92-93.

gets things done – both those the public does not care about and those it would rather not face. For that de Gaulle would have to wrest France from its real rulers, because “the executive is in fact in Algiers; it is composed of civilians and soldiers, and decides about France on the basis of Algeria.”<sup>446</sup> It was no wonder, then, that young people in France, timid and serious, were losing faith in their ability to influence public affairs, both within France, where they were indifferent to the referendum, and in the Cold War world, where France’s influence had diminished.<sup>447</sup> The French public were confused: wanting an Empire without violence or exploitation, they turned to the only half-credible (and thus necessary) choice, with the lowered expectation that he stop hostilities somehow. But to vote ‘yes’ in the referendum, Sartre claimed, would be to dream on, whereas to vote ‘no’ would enable the public to awaken.<sup>448</sup>

In 1958 a huge majority of the French (about 80%) voted ‘yes’, thus signalling, in Sartre’s terms, their willingness to dream on. Nevertheless, Sartre was prescient in asserting that the ‘Constitution of contempt’ and the monarchic republic that it established were only a cosmetic change, whereas the causes of the republican crisis were objective and profound, and required similar solutions. Left intact, the infrastructures of French Algerian colonialism did bring its own destruction, as Sartre had foreseen in 1956.<sup>449</sup> Both sides of the Algerian struggle supported De Gaulle in the hope that he might bring a conclusion favourable to their interests. However, as early as September 1959 de Gaulle signalled that he would consider deliberating Algerian independence if violence were to stop. A more sweeping confirmation of France’s intention to face decolonisation came the following summer. De Gaulle’s *appel* of 14 June 1960 came symbolically just before the twentieth anniversary of his definitive *appel* of 18 June 1940 to resist the German occupation, and stated clearly that despite the nostalgic symbols riddling French patriotic imaginary (and his own speech), France must modernise, conceptually and technologically, be “transformed into a new country and must marry its epoch.”<sup>450</sup> The Gaullist vision of prefigured French grandeur

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<sup>446</sup> Sartre, “Frogs,” 98-99, 102-105, 109.

<sup>447</sup> Sartre, “Frogs,” 111-112.

<sup>448</sup> Sartre, “Frogs,” 108-109, 118-119.

<sup>449</sup> Sartre, “Frogs,” 107, 117; “Colonialism,” 46-47.

<sup>450</sup> Translated and quoted in Kedward, 402.

expected France to move with the times and rise to its glorious destiny. Again, answers to questions about where, who and what France was seemed foretold to de Gaulle by the pre-existing essence of Frenchness.

Yet this essential and absolute conception of France and Frenchness was polemical, and the Algerian War was seen as another *guerre franco-française* in reproducing old French political divisions for contemporary agendas, using memory and historical analogy. Rousso distinguished between the public mobilisation of the past as *heritage* (tapping into traditions); as *nostalgic foil*; and as *fantasy* (being entirely imagined). The *colons* and their supporters, like Bidault, tried to appropriate the memory and moral legacy of the Résistance. Formed in 1960, the *colon* militia was named Organisation Armée Secrète (OAS), alluding to the Armée Secrète of the Second World War. Among the left, Rousso mentions Pierre Vidal-Naquet's essay on the three groups of resisters to colonial rule in Algeria: the *Tiers-Mondistes*, the 'Bolsheviks', and those he calls the 'Dreyfusards', for whom the resistance to French rule in Algeria continued a historical fight harking back to the Résistance itself and earlier, to the original anti-nationalist Dreyfusards.<sup>451</sup> In fact, Vidal-Naquet and Rousso seem to agree that the left-wing reaction of the 'Dreyfusards' – and the argument could extend to include most right-wing positions – had more to do, as suggested earlier, with their vision of France than with their vision of Algeria, being another instance of the French left-right political and ideological struggle played out at least since the Third Republic.

Eventually, the anti-colonialist stance prevailed, with or without its leftist historical and ideological credentials. De Gaulle came to realise and admit, in April 1961 that "*la décolonisation est notre intérêt*."<sup>452</sup> By the 1962 Evian accords France severed Algeria from itself abruptly, reluctantly and violently, like a gangrenous limb whose severance was essential to the survival of the French body politic.<sup>453</sup>

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<sup>451</sup> The Dreyfusard label revived the Dreyfus affair as an outstanding collusion of French militarism, racist anti-Semitism, Pétainist nationalism and traditional Catholicism. Rousso, 75-76.

<sup>452</sup> Quoted in Shipway, "La Décolonisation," 16.

<sup>453</sup> The gangrene metaphor comes from the scandalous publication in which Algerian authors criticised the French use of torture: *La Gangrène*, ed. by Jérôme Lindon (Paris: Minuit, 1959).

## New outlooks on representation

The representation of reality, past and present, also became a scene of contestation for literary representation. Partly in reaction to the prevailing national narrative of the time and partly to escape the weight of its traditional underpinnings, younger artists in postwar France formulated their own principles and experimented with new forms of representing reality – in literary fiction and its critique, in cinema and even in journalism. Among the more comprehensive of such experiments was the *nouveau roman*.

The *nouveaux romanciers* is a rather journalistic label for several novelists, all published by Minuit, whose experimental writing challenged common assumptions about the novel (and its relations to other media), realism, authorial intention, linguistic usage, meaning and interpretation, and the standards of literary criticism. Despite these common points the *nouveau roman* label is less misleading (but was also less commercially successful) than the 'Angry Young Men' label, but a label it remains. Adopted at the encouragement of Minuit from the title of a 1957 Maurice Nadeau review in *Critique*, the *nouveau roman* label served with alternative labels of the day – *Ecole de Minuit*, *Ecole du regard*, *Chosisme* – to refer to a grouping that variously included Alain Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute, Michel Butor, Claude Simon, Robert Pinget, Samuel Beckett, Marguerite Duras, and, later, Jean Ricardou. The *nouveaux romanciers* were not a definite group or school and shared no common ideology or manifesto: their publisher, Jérôme Lindon, later admitted that they were united mainly in their opposition to the literary conventions into which they matured.

The kernel of *nouveau roman* approaches was the need to produce a new kind of novel to reflect a new kind of postwar reality, for which they considered the traditional mimetic, detailed novelistic realism (of Stendhal, Balzac, Flaubert) to be inadequate. Literary tradition was not opposed, it was reassessed: what was opposed was the privileging of its outdated devices as doxa. Sarraute criticised

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Minuit, like other resistance publishers Maspéro and Seuil, were active opponents of the war and the French use of torture. See also: Benjamin Stora, *La Gangrène et l'oubli: la mémoire de la guerre d'Algérie* (Paris: La Découverte, 1991); and Martin Shipway, "Forces de l'ordre, forces du chaos: le syndrome algérien," *La Chouette* 32 (2001), 87-98.

the notion of character as an over-described, overly familiar figure. Robbe-Grillet thought the character, assisted by similarly outdated linear, progressive plots, preserved what he called the 'myth of depth'.<sup>454</sup> Sarraute, Robbe-Grillet and Butor believed that novelistic form should be more than a seamless narration foregrounding 'content': both 'form' and 'content' were equally, indivisibly important in conveying the novel to the reader. If 'content' could not be isolated, then its single 'meaning' was unreachable, thus decentering authorial intention as now secondary to readers' interpretations. This view redefined the novel as a self-contained experiment, which was therefore resistant to Sartrean writerly commitment: every authorial choice in the novel was unavoidably informed by principle or ideology, so making the novel explicitly commit, for example, to social realism would regress it to didactic dogmatism. For these positions, among the French left the *nouveaux romanciers* – like British experimental writing – were regarded as politically reactionary and derided as 'formalistic'. To their detractors they symptomised a 'crisis of the novel,' a dead end in novelistic realism; to their (mainly academic) supporters they offered the solution to that crisis in leaping beyond the realist *impasse*.<sup>455</sup>

It is difficult to generalise about the finer points of the *nouveau roman*. Its *chosisme* or *regard* were distinctly associated with Robbe-Grillet, less so with Butor, and with Sarraute not at all. Robbe-Grillet's concerns seemed more ideological in outlook, whereas Sarraute and Butor considered the novel chiefly from literary-aesthetic perspectives. Butor's belief in a single valid truth in reality to be reflected in fiction was at odds with Robbe-Grillet's subjectivism. A short elaboration on each writer's distinctive position is therefore in order.

Nathalie Sarraute was the earliest published *nouveau romancier* with her *Tropismes* (1939). A regular contributor to *TM*, her first postwar novel, *Portrait d'un inconnu* (1948) was prefaced by Sartre, who misleadingly analysed it as an existentialist 'anti-novel'. However, by 1960 the two fell out and Sartre

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<sup>454</sup> Robbe-Grillet, *For a New Novel*, 23. All references below are to the English translations of Robbe-Grillet, Butor and Sarraute.

<sup>455</sup> For a detailed history of the New Novel see: Pierre A.G. Astier, *Encyclopédie du nouveau roman: la Crise du roman français et le nouveau réalisme* (Paris: Nouvelles Editions Debresse, 1968).

denounced Sarraute's fiction as bourgeois.<sup>456</sup> Sarraute's important critical treatise is the essay collection *L'Ere du soupçon* (1956), where she praised the unthinking, unfeeling experience of the twentieth-century *homo absurdus*, whose literary presence suggested the absence of ultimate depth in the human mind – an important counterbalance to Woolfian psychologism, which Sarraute, like Angus Wilson, regarded as too narrow.<sup>457</sup> Instead, Sarraute suggested that unexplored states of consciousness were best borne out not by internal monologue but against an interlocutor, through what she called 'sub-conversation'.<sup>458</sup> In the title essay, Sarraute dubbed as 'suspicion' readers' growing disbelief in realist fictional characters and the mutual wariness between readers and writers. Traditional realism had told readers too much and in excessive detail, and now new fiction needed to entice them back by minimising characterisation and description.<sup>459</sup> To remain realistic, the novel must stop overcompensating for its fictional status by competing with the richness of reality, instead overcoming readers' suspicion by offering "a deeper, more complex, clearer, truer knowledge of what they are, of their circumstances and their lives."<sup>460</sup> Sub-conversation, relying on the necessary fictional other, was Sarraute's way of seducing the reader, and was influenced by Sartre's concepts of authenticity, bad faith and 'being-for-others'. An existential fear of authentic contact with other humans underlies bad faith and makes interpersonal relations a constant intersubjective conflict, a play of psychological manipulation where resistance to the seduction of others is tempered by fascination with their influence.<sup>461</sup>

The most comprehensive statement of principle among 1950s *nouveaux romanciers* was in the essays collected into Robbe-Grillet's *Pour un nouveau roman*, which show the development of his vision from 1955 to 1963 and his

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<sup>456</sup> Celia Britton, *The Nouveau Roman: Fiction, Theory and Politics* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), 32.

<sup>457</sup> Nathalie Sarraute, "The Age of Suspicion," in *Tropismes and the Age of Suspicion*, trans. by Maria Jolas (London: John Calder, 1963 [Gallimard, 1956]), 59-60, 76, 97-101.

<sup>458</sup> Sarraute, 105-109.

<sup>459</sup> Sarraute, 83, 85-88, 92-94.

<sup>460</sup> Sarraute, 134.

<sup>461</sup> Britton, 32-35; exemplifying this is Sarraute's second novel, *Martereau* (1953).



takes on Sartre and on Structuralism.<sup>462</sup> The earliest essays, “The Use of Theory” and “From Realism to Reality,” made the basic assertion that each novel must invent its own forms and constitute its own reality, rendering verisimilitude redundant and fostering trust in the impression of falseness. Thus, the novel is a discrete, autonomous domain that should not be a vehicle for expression (or reality) but of exploration (of itself). Considering the singularity of each novel, the label ‘*nouveau roman*’, like the label ‘realism’, was to Robbe-Grillet only a portmanteau term that in itself meant little.<sup>463</sup> As he claimed in “A Future for the Novel,” the *nouveau roman* was mistaken for a botched literary experiment because “one is always decadent in comparison to things of the past” and so “a new form will always be seen more or less as an absence of any form at all.”<sup>464</sup> But the old realist novel stagnated because of its traditionality, ‘pseudo-mystery’ and ‘myth of depth’, and was surpassed by contemporary cinema, which could “construct a world both more solid and more immediate” by having “gestures and objects... be *there* before being *something*.”<sup>465</sup> The thrust of future novelistic writing, then, is to ‘de-signify’.<sup>466</sup>

This *Chosisme* was only a partial solution, and in “On Several Obsolete Notions” Robbe-Grillet suggested that other devices be discarded to revitalise the novel: the confidence in familiar *character* (following Sarraute); the primacy of *plot*; *commitment* (in the Sartrean sense); and the distinction between *form* and *content* that subjugated the former to the latter. Instead, Robbe-Grillet exhorted authors to not be afraid to make ‘art for art’s sake’, because “it is the style, the *écriture*, and it alone which is ‘responsible’,” and only to itself.<sup>467</sup> Conscious experimentation with literary form itself carried ideological weight and was all

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<sup>462</sup> Despite this, Robbe-Grillet suggested in the late 1960s that the ‘theoretical work’ in his novels makes his essays redundant. Arthur E. Babcock, *The New Novel in France: Theory and Practice of the nouveau roman* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1997), 25.

<sup>463</sup> Robbe-Grillet, 8-9, 12, 14, 157-158, 160-163.

<sup>464</sup> Compare Robbe-Grillet, 167 and 17-18.

<sup>465</sup> Robbe-Grillet, 19-21.

<sup>466</sup> Leo Bersani, *Balzac to Beckett: Center and Circumference in French Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 246.

<sup>467</sup> Note his adoption of Barthes’s term ‘*écriture*’. Robbe-Grillet, 27-34, 39-40, 44-45.

the social *engagement* that could be expected from literature.<sup>468</sup> Sartre continued to be a problematic point of reference for Robbe-Grillet in “Nature, Humanism, Tragedy,” where his early fiction (e.g. *Nausea*), together with Camus’s concept of the absurd, was shown to reiterate the fallacy of the tragic abandonment of human freedom. To Robbe-Grillet, novelistic humanism merely fostered the myth of deeper meaning or transcendence, and its attachment to the fundamentally tragic character of ‘human nature’ meant that nature, humanism and tragedy all had to be discarded in new writing. Their replacement was to be a new subjectivism, or as Robbe-Grillet put it: “I am concerned... only with the world as *my point of view* orients it; I shall never know any other.”<sup>469</sup> As he later clarified in “New Novel, New Man,” this did not imply that the *nouveau roman* was anti-humanistic, ascetic or otherwise pessimistic: in fact, subjectivism meant an interest *only* in the existence and experience of the human individual, and this also left the freedom of interpretation in the hands of the reader’s subjectivity.<sup>470</sup>

Like Robbe-Grillet, Michel Butor saw the novel as a self-contained system, and probably more than him, Butor believed in the organising, world-building power of the novel as a narrative governing our perception, and so, also influenced by Sarraute, he sought to examine the novel’s terms as a literary form and its relation to culture.<sup>471</sup> Butor followed his first novel, *Passage de Milan* (1954), with a prolific career as author and critic, and by the mid-1960s had already published two essay collections, *Répertoire I* (1960) and *Répertoire II* (1964). Butor’s initial position was already rather elaborate, taking in some points made earlier by Sarraute, Robbe-Grillet and Barthes. “The Novel as Research” already asserted the novel’s experimental autonomy and its reliance on formal innovation, which was inseparable from its ‘content’. Butor echoed Barthes in criticising the complicity of traditional narrative in the discursive order, and preferred to discuss the novel’s ‘symbolism’ rather than its ‘realism’, that is, how it signifies (its place in the reader’s experience) rather than what it

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<sup>468</sup> Britton notes that Robbe-Grillet was an early adopter of that idea in 1957; Britton, 26-28. In this sense Robbe-Grillet’s position is close to that of Sartre in his studies of Mallarmé and Flaubert.

<sup>469</sup> Robbe-Grillet, 51-52, 57-61, 73, 75; Britton, 23-25.

<sup>470</sup> Robbe-Grillet, 133-141.

<sup>471</sup> Babcock, 73-74.

shows and means.<sup>472</sup> However, Butor thought that the link between the novel and reality was closer and more stable than envisaged by Robbe-Grillet: literature was not altogether discrete but an experimental social function, and the novel was a way of living, of integrating individual experience.<sup>473</sup> He added in “Research on the Technique of the Novel” that the novel as fiction imitated truth by rendering a false world, but through its literary structure it was useful to understanding real life, and therefore it had an earnest moral position. This led Butor to seek to secure the novel’s intelligibility through authorial control, anticipating and taking responsibility for the different ways it could be read.<sup>474</sup>

The *nouveau roman* implied a new literary criticism, and in this field the early, proto-Structuralist Barthes again emerges as influential. Robbe-Grillet, an enthusiastic early reader of *Le Degré zéro de l’écriture*, mentions Barthes twice in *Pour un nouveau roman*: regarding the mystifying power of literature in “A Future for the Novel,” and in the epigraph to “Nature, Humanism, Tragedy,” supporting Robbe-Grillet’s condemnation of tragedy as complicit with misery.<sup>475</sup> Barthes lay beneath much of Robbe-Grillet’s criticism, influencing his objection to signification, his insistence on the indivisibility and parity of form and content, and his objection to committed writing. Barthes, for his part, was the first to consider *Les Gommages* seriously, following that with critical studies of *nouveaux romans* throughout the decade.<sup>476</sup> Barthes and his increasing Structuralist bent were a certain, if not the only influence on the critical reception of *nouveaux romans* – so much so that they were sometimes taken to be Structuralist novels.<sup>477</sup>

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<sup>472</sup> Michel Butor, “The Novel as Research,” trans. by Gerald Fabian, in *Inventory: Essays by Michel Butor*, ed. by Richard Howard (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970), 26-27.

<sup>473</sup> Butor, “The Novel as Research,” 30; Babcock, 75.

<sup>474</sup> Michel Butor, “Research on the Technique of the Novel,” trans. Richard Howard, in *Inventory*, 15-25; Babcock, 76; Britton, 60-62.

<sup>475</sup> Robbe-Grillet, 49.

<sup>476</sup> Roland Barthes, “Littérature objective,” *Critique* 86-87 (July-August 1954), 581-591; and then also: Roland Barthes, “Littérature littéraire,” *Critique* 100-101 (September-October 1955), 820-826; Roland Barthes, “Il n’y a pas d’école Robbe-Grillet,” *Arguments* 6 (February 1958), 6-8; Roland Barthes, “Littérature et discontinu,” *Critique* 185 (October 1962), 817-829.

<sup>477</sup> Britton, 48.

Essentially, the Structuralist and semiological influences on *nouveau roman* writing and interpretation meant an insistence that meaning is diffuse and not explicit, and that it can only be inferred from the big picture rather than through isolated elements. The conjunction between the thought of the Swiss linguist Saussure and that of Lévi-Strauss, his chief advocate in postwar France, rests on the fundamental claim that the human unconscious contains a set of *universal* structures which produce meaning. Social behaviour, being symbolic and having extra-literal ‘depth’, is generated by the unconscious structures. Social structures and relations were more representative of the tacit rules and implicit meanings of social interaction than conscious individual action. Lévi-Strauss believed social relations, or any field of the *sciences humaines* could be examined by interdisciplinary Structuralist methods, reflecting the basic unity among them. In his own work, he synthesised anthropology and linguistics, and contributed to the study of mythology (in *Anthropologie structurale*, 1958). But Lévi-Strauss did not engage in literary criticism, where Structuralist influences hark back to the Russian Formalism school and the Prague school. Their legacy in linguistic and literary enquiry was the understanding of language as an unconscious system existing independently of observers (attributed to Jakobson); linguistic functionalism, locating the meaning of linguistic units in their symbolic function (attributed to Mukarovsky); and the focus on formal and poetic devices and narrative typologies.

Barthes used the Structuralist ‘symbolic function’ to project what he called ‘poetics’: rather than *what* a literary work means (which assumes meaning is extractable from within it), he examined the dynamics of *how* meanings were produced in texts, that is, how texts *signify*, or generate meanings, as *systems*. From *Le Degré zéro de l’écriture*, through *Mythologies*, to *Eléments de sémiologie* (1964) and *Critique et vérité* (1966), Barthes constructed a theory of signs and signification (Semiology) which, like the structure of the human unconscious, he understood as universal.<sup>478</sup> But until the late 1950s, and “Le Mythe aujourd’hui” is a prime example of this, Barthes was more interested in

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<sup>478</sup> Another influence on both Barthes and Lévi-Strauss was the work of the Russian Formalist folklorist Vladimir Propp, which suggested a finite and universal set of morphemes (functions and roles) structuring folk narratives. Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, trans. by Lawrence Scott (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1958 [1928]).

the ‘bigger picture’ of the ideological purpose of *myth*, rather than the workings of its semiological *structure*. As he confessed later, he had hoped that structural anthropology would cut through the social and historical thicket to find society’s systems of classification and expose its fundamental structure, its ‘*socio-logique*’. This total anthropology of contemporary culture was the aim of Barthes’s semiology.<sup>479</sup>

The position of Barthes’s critique was rather precarious, and eventually he needed, like the *nouveaux romanciers* (particularly Robbe-Grillet), to defend his critical viewpoint against established and traditionalist critics. Barthes’s *Sur Racine* (1963) and *Essais critiques* (1964) aroused the wrath of Raymond Picard, an eminent *Sorbonnard*, who had written on Racine a decade earlier. In *Nouvelle Critique ou nouvelle imposture* (1965) Picard attacked Barthes and other (pejoratively ‘new’) critics, like Lucien Goldmann, Barthes’s colleague at the magazine *Théâtre populaire*. Responding in *Critique et vérité* (1966), Barthes reiterated his position that criticism necessarily involved value judgments that reflect some ideological investment; the vanguard of French criticism relied on verisimilitude, being the similarity to the ‘tried and true’ common practice and ‘common sense’.<sup>480</sup> As an ideology, critical verisimilitude could be examined semiologically, through the unspoken rules that govern it at the time, being objectivity, ‘good taste’, clarity, and literality. To Barthes, what was presented as ‘objectivity’ was a naturalised bourgeois consensus; ‘good taste’ was merely a system prohibiting unsanctioned topics, methods and language; ‘clarity’ was another form of social control, approving bourgeois ‘language’ and dismissing all else as ‘jargon’; and the inability of the traditional critic to fathom symbolic uses of language was his own failing, an *a-symbolia*.<sup>481</sup>

Barthes claimed that the realisation of the symbolic nature of language, partly through Structuralism, was evidence that times were changing: “we are

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<sup>479</sup> Roland Barthes, “Sociologie et socio-logique: à propos de deux ouvrages de Claude Lévi-Strauss,” *Œuvres Complètes I: 1942-1965* (Paris: Seuil, 1993), 967-978; Lavers, 104-106, 112, 117-118.

<sup>480</sup> Roland Barthes, *Criticism and Truth*, trans. and ed. by Katrine Pilcher Keuneman, foreword by Philip Thody (London: The Athlone Press, 1987), 30-35. Originally published as Barthes, *Critique et vérité* (Paris: Seuil, 1966).

<sup>481</sup> Barthes, *Criticism and Truth*, 39-40, 42-43, 48-52, 57.

entering a *general crisis of commentary*,” that corresponds to the already-familiar crisis of writing, and “brings the critic closer to the writer.”<sup>482</sup> From a synchronic examination, “the very definition of the work is changing: it is no longer a historical fact, it is becoming an anthropological fact, since no history can exhaust its meaning.”<sup>483</sup> Criticism, which had always been about *asserting* evaluative authority, had to change, too, as the literary fiction that Barthes and Robbe-Grillet wanted to see *denied* authoritative interpretation. To Barthes, while structural semiologists (as scientists) examined literature for the conditions of its signification and for its possible meaning, the critic’s work of interpretation was creative: “the author and the work are only the starting-points of an analysis whose horizon is a language.”<sup>484</sup>

This correspondence between two essentially creative activities – the new novel and new criticism – suggests their consideration in tandem. In fact, the 1950s also saw the rise of a new school of French filmmakers who were influenced by the new fiction and criticism, who were accordingly named *la nouvelle vague*. The association between *nouveaux romanciers* and new wave cinema was cemented through collaborations: Alain Resnais, in particular, collaborated with both Duras (in *Hiroshima mon amour*) and Robbe-Grillet (*L’Année dernière à Marienbad*, 1960). The *nouvelle vague* struggled with the same cultural canon as the *nouveau roman*, and this was apparent even when they were not collaborating. In his *Les Quatre cent coups* (1959) Truffaut’s alter ego, the adolescent Antoine Doinel, discovers and idolises Balzac, plagiarising him for a school essay to his teacher’s pleasure (subtext: the establishment revels in the familiar) and creating a shrine for him, that burns down (subtext: parody of popular idolatry and its outcome). The affinity between new wave and new novel was more a matter of outlook than of generation: Duras was nearly a decade older than Resnais; and Truffaut, thirty-two years Sarraute’s junior, was influenced by her “Age of Suspicion” in his foundational text of the *nouvelle vague*, “Une Certaine tendance du cinéma français.”<sup>485</sup>

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<sup>482</sup> Barthes, *Criticism and Truth*, 66 (my italics).

<sup>483</sup> Barthes, *Criticism and Truth*, 67.

<sup>484</sup> Barthes, *Criticism and Truth*, 77, 79; Moriarty, *Roland Barthes*, 3, 109-110.

<sup>485</sup> François Truffaut, “Une Certaine Tendance du cinéma français,” *Le Plaisir des yeux* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 1987), 192-206.

The *nouveau roman*, *nouvelle vague*, and what Picard had named *nouvelle critique* are best considered together, as avant-gardist attempts to change their respective fields of practice, seen as falling out of step with their purpose. Later this was related to the idea of ‘the death of the author,’ associated with Barthes, Foucault and anti-humanism (as noted above in the introduction). It is a radical idea – the death of the author as the liberation of the reader – highlighting the radicalism of what it opposed: the belief that the author is the ultimate signified of the text. But the idea of the reader’s liberation was current in postwar French literary discourse before 1968: the reader had been reasserting his position at least since Sarraute’s “L’Ere du soupçon” (published in 1950 but written in 1947), having tired of the author’s foreign presence in the text, and then again in Robbe-Grillet’s “On Some Obsolete Notions” (1957), relieved of ‘content’ and ‘meaning’.

Lynn Higgins, who studied the new novel, new criticism and new wave together, suggested other elements informing their shared experience. Firstly, she introduces the Freudian notion of *Nachträglichkeit* (deferred, belated action), which reveals “the belated necessity of negotiating the relative consequences of memory and continued denial.”<sup>486</sup> The new ventures sought innovation to escape plodding the same traditional avenues, but by defining themselves in contradistinction to tradition, they affirmed its importance: Sarraute, Butor and Robbe-Grillet were acutely aware of the traditions of the novel; Truffaut and Resnais engaged with past cinema both in their early careers (as a film writer and an assistant director respectively) and in their films, through intertextual allusions and play with conventional anticipations; and Barthes was fascinated by traditions of writing, be it history (Michelet), drama (Racine), or utopian thought (Fourier). The *nouveaux* practitioners saw themselves as standing on the shoulders of giants, seeing further in no small part thanks to their predecessors. Then again, that also owed much to the specific postwar juncture: “World War II is never far below the surface, and its unresolved issues shape both postwar

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<sup>486</sup> Lynn A. Higgins, *New Novel, New Wave, New Politics: Fiction and the Representation of History in Postwar France* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 209-212 [henceforth: Higgins, *New Novel*].

events and texts, and within texts, both anecdote and form.”<sup>487</sup> In France, these unresolved issues were prolonged, as we have seen, by postwar distortions of the past and its memory, particularly owing to “the rhetorical power of Gaullist oratory to manipulate images and construct histories.”<sup>488</sup> Lacking tools independently and objectively to assess the past, the *nouveaux* worked with what they had – individual perception and memory. Their texts, as *Hiroshima mon amour* will demonstrate, “do not always represent, but they do re-present in one way or another: flashbacks, primal scenes, hysterical discourses, ironies, repetitiousness, and the uncanny.”<sup>489</sup> Importantly, this expression took the form of the contours of mental experience, particularly of deferred or revisited experience, leaving the reader not even with sensory (or intuitive) perception but with its remains.

The post-war and anti-Gaullist elements of the new artistic ventures were also reflected in contemporary journalism and particularly in one new current affairs weekly, *L'Express*. Starting publication in 1953 as a weekly supplement to the economic newspaper *Les Echos*, it was later relaunched as France's first weekly magazine, taking an American format modelled on *Time* magazine. *L'Express* was led by two young co-editors: its owner, Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber, a former journalist for another postwar paper, *Le Monde*; and Françoise Giroud, until then the co-editor of *Elle*. From the outset *L'Express* was a left-liberal paper, campaigning for the unpopular anti-colonialist cause and for its political champion, Pierre Mendès-France. Its trenchant anti-colonialism provoked official antagonism in censorship and seizures, and in 1956 Servan-Schreiber (formerly a Free France pilot) was even drafted to serve in Algeria.<sup>490</sup> Still, the fresh fighting spirit of *L'Express* attracted a young readership, particularly among the up-and-coming *cadres*, and a stellar list of contributors, including Sartre and Camus, Malraux and François Mauriac. This was also where Robbe-Grillet defended his second novel, *Le Voyeur* (1955), in articles which

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<sup>487</sup> Higgins, *New Novel*, 213.

<sup>488</sup> Higgins, *New Novel*, 214.

<sup>489</sup> Higgins, *New Novel*, 211.

<sup>490</sup> On his return he published a controversial witness account of French brutality in Algeria: Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber, *Lieutenant en Algérie* (Paris: Julliard, 1957).



later became the kernel of *Pour un nouveau roman*.<sup>491</sup> In 1957 *L'Express* conducted a survey exploring the experience of eighteen-to-thirty-year-olds, a cohort born entirely in the interwar period, which Giroud adapted into book form the following year as *La Nouvelle vague*.<sup>492</sup> The study, which gave the filmic movement its name and which shaped Sartre's understanding of youth in "The Frogs who Demand a King," showed a generally decent cohort, who nevertheless felt alienated from established notions of truth and collectivity, and were suspicious of the Establishment and the ideologies of the day. They were generally happy with their lot, believed in love, marriage, peace and freedom, and cared about democracy, social injustices and the Algerian situation. However, they turned away from politics and the public sphere, feeling that while things had gone awry they were also beyond their influence. As chapter 5 will elaborate, these youths shared a discrete young culture, only partly influenced by French mainstream culture, for while they were France's inheritors, it was not yet theirs.

### ***Hiroshima mon amour***

The film *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959) provides a useful focal point for any discussion of postwar relations of French people to their personal and collective pasts and to the nation. The film, directed by Alain Resnais, was based on a screenplay by Marguerite Duras which was developed by the two in collaboration.<sup>493</sup> The cinematic text is still a richer, more familiar and more complex point of reference than the screenplay, and will be considered in discussing the screenplay. The film is set against the advent of the nuclear age, relating specifically to the nuclear catastrophe of Japan at the end of the Second World War. As mentioned in the introduction, the nuclear 'option' was on the French agenda since 1952 and met no significant public opposition, so by 1959

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<sup>491</sup> Babcock, 9, 11.

<sup>492</sup> Françoise Giroud, *La Nouvelle vague: portraits de la jeunesse* (Paris: Gallimard, 1958).

<sup>493</sup> All page references to the screenplay will be in parentheses in the main text, and will refer to the definitive edition: Marguerite Duras, *Hiroshima mon amour* (Paris: Gallimard/Folio, 1960).

the issue of nuclear armament and its consequences concerned France directly and concretely.<sup>494</sup>

The plot of *Hiroshima mon amour* breaks all three Aristotelian dramatic unities: time, place, and action. Only skeletal details are apparent: She (both main characters are unnamed) is a French film actress in Hiroshima to make a film 'about the peace' (in the shadow of the nuclear stalemate), and before the shooting wrap meets Him, a married Japanese architect, falling into a fleeting and clearly hopeless affair. In the process of this affair both relive moments of their past traumatic experiences: He with the bombing of Hiroshima, and She with the aftermath of her youthful affair with a German soldier during the Occupation. She not only saw her lover shot dead, but had to endure the retribution of her townsfolk at Nevers, who shaved her head at Liberation as was the custom with French women who had associated with Germans (*femmes tondues*). After being forced into hiding in the family cellar, she was let out and told to leave for Paris and never return. In Her encounter with Him, it becomes increasingly apparent that she sees and relives her old love through Him – another reason for the hopelessness of their affair. The disruption of linear space and time with the elision between Hiroshima and Nevers, the Japanese man and the German soldier, the living and the dead, is also a disruption of action, as the short narrative duration covered by the film – two days – is shot through with eruptions and irruptions of the longer duration of Her traumatic experience and thirteen-year post-traumatic mourning.

Despite the centrality of Hiroshima in the film, its entire Japanese element was born out of Argos Films' need to use up Yen capital they could not move out of Japan: they decided on a Franco-Japanese co-production and asked Resnais, until then a documentarist, to make a full-length film about the atomic bomb. After two abortive attempts Resnais despaired of his own documentary method, heavily reliant on archival material, and decided to abandon it for a kind of fictional storytelling, a narrative (*récit*). Secretly happy that the celebrated young novelist Françoise Sagan had declined to write the screenplay, Resnais approached Duras, who eventually accepted.

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<sup>494</sup> Kedward, 394-395.

Both Resnais and Duras were initially apprehensive about the Franco-Japanese project. For Resnais, addressing the Japanese nuclear catastrophe seemed both fitting and unfitting after his previous production, *Nuit et brouillard* (1956), which had been the first postwar film to deal, successfully and controversially, with the Nazi extermination camps. Resnais was expected to make a film about the bomb, and precisely for that he was reluctant to do so, dreading a possible ‘message film’ that would amount to a simple ‘never again!’ Eventually, Resnais and Duras decided to move the nuclear theme to the background of events.<sup>495</sup> Duras later claimed that for two weeks she could not write a thing. She saw the script of *Hiroshima mon amour* as her failure in the face of the staggering phenomenon of Hiroshima, and claimed that the words of the Japanese lover, “*tu n’as rien vu à Hiroshima*” (22) accuse her, too.

Two months later, when Resnais went to Japan, Duras equipped him with a preliminary version of the dialogues and with what they called the film’s *continuité souterraine* (‘underground continuity’): descriptive passages meant only as reference for Resnais and his two leads, Emanuelle Riva and Eiji Okada, and not intended to be part of the completed filmic text (although some remain in the published screenplay). One could say that in the process of making a film about loss *something was already lost*, and the definitive versions of the film and the screenplay, the product of continuous rewriting, must be taken as intertexts, referring to- or even relying on- hidden or implicit parts of each other while displaying a surface full of silences and lacks. This, together with Duras’s admitted ‘failure’ to address her subjects adequately suggests the ultimate *impossibility* of speaking of Hiroshima, which, together with the hopeless love story, is both “unforgettable and unrepresentable”.<sup>496</sup>

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<sup>495</sup> “I said to her, “...there are planes carrying atomic bombs which are perpetually flying... over our planet and over our conversation... But despite that... the day is carrying on as usual.” So the film we ought to have been making was... what you might call a traditional love story in which the atomic bomb would be... like a sort of backdrop.” Resnais in undated radio interview (anonymous translation), from Luc Lagier, *Hiroshima le temps d’un retour* (France: CinéCinéma – PdJ Production, 2004). The film credits the Archives sonores INA as a source.

<sup>496</sup> Lynn A. Higgins, “Durasian (Pre)Occupations,” *L’Esprit Créateur* XXX, 2 (Summer 1990), 52.

Pascal Ory considers Auschwitz and Hiroshima to be the two images dominating French culture of the first postwar decade.<sup>497</sup> European mass-extermiation and the Japanese nuclear catastrophe symbolised an age of unprecedented brutality in the mid-twentieth century, but left odd traces in history and memory. This is because both events in their devastation and totality are what Hayden White called ‘holocaustal’, a new kind of event in human experience and representation – the modernist event. White borrowed from psychoanalytic discourse in defining the modernist event as one which by magnitude and singularity is, like infantile traumas in neurotic individuals, neither completely forgotten nor adequately remembered. White followed Fredric Jameson in noting that literary modernism is the product of a ‘*social crisis of narratable experiences*’ and a ‘*semiotic crisis of narrative paradigms*’.<sup>498</sup> Realist representation, relying on human agency, causality and closure, is categorically inadequate for representing the modernist event; instead, it should be represented by ‘de-realisation’, by voiding it of any ‘intrinsic’ significance and reference. This ‘de-realisation’ functions as both a social and a literary effect: modernist narrative may de-fetishise signification in representation, and so may have a therapeutic effect, facilitating the process of mourning. Its biggest challenge is to preserve the not-fully-representable signified (catastrophe) as nevertheless more important than its signifier (the modernist narrative). However, this makes the expressive function the only stable unity of the modernist narrative.

The paradigmatic nature of Auschwitz and Hiroshima as the sign of the times after 1945 has been widely recognised, in literary and theoretical circles mostly as representation, what Duras called the ‘malady of death’. Addressing this, Julia Kristeva suggested that the problem of naming the ‘invisible’ leads to illogicality and silence, producing a new rhetoric of images based on our melancholy fidelity to the horror, leading Duras to aesthetic awkwardness. As she resists the glib catharsis of sheer verbal outlet, Duras offers only minimal

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<sup>497</sup> Ory, 124.

<sup>498</sup> Hayden White, “The Modernist Event,” *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event*, ed. by Vivian Sobchack (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), 20, 23-24; quoting from Fredric Jameson, *Sartre: The Origins of a Style* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 37-38, n. 15 (my italics).

catharsis: one is left with the pain itself and no redemptive horizons.<sup>499</sup> The construction of the Japanese lover as the lost German lover, with whom (as object of loss and mourning) She had already been identified, could be interpreted as such 'aesthetic awkwardness'. Their separation comes in the final scene, when She names the Japanese lover and lets him name her: the names, while not proper, are indices of individuation and a new apartness of self from other. A turning point in the process comes in the recounting scene at the riverside café, when She first manages to adequately express her experience, mastering absence by assuming control of her past and her dissociated self.

One of the first striking features of *Hiroshima mon amour* is the *anonymity* of its characters, giving it a fabulated, unrealistic feel, which can be understood as part of the fictional narrative's attempt to 'de-signify' reality. After all, the nuclear cataclysm underlying the narrative beggars belief and creates an awkwardness (following Kristeva), being a symptom of the 'social crisis of narratable experiences' (following White). Yet the anonymity of the characters does not simply reference the external world; rather, as Emma Wilson suggests, the narrative depends on anonymity to highlight the constructed nature of the self as subject and object. The identity of the French actress rests here on the role she plays for other people, being her German and Japanese lovers.<sup>500</sup> The role of the Frenchwoman as lover and love object only springs from an intense need of two alienated strangers to nurse their psychological wounds by taking refuge within each other.<sup>501</sup> This anonymity is sustained within skeletal character formation, and led even Resnais to compensate for this meagreness with speculation: "we used to spend evenings making up all kinds of stories about her. For instance, she is really a compulsive liar and the Nevers story... is nothing but a fabrication. Or maybe she has just been released from an asylum and she has made up the

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<sup>499</sup> Julia Kristeva, "The Pain of Sorrow in the Modern World: The Works of Marguerite Duras," trans. by Katharine A. Jensen, *PMLA* 102, 2 (March 1987), 138-141.

<sup>500</sup> Emma Wilson, "'Duras mon amour': identité et mensonge," *Dalhousie French Studies* 50 (Spring 2000), 10.

<sup>501</sup> Peter Schulman, "Vercors et Duras: l'occupation des silences," *New Zealand Journal of French Studies* 19, 1 (1998), 19-20.

complete story. You can see to what degree her personality could evade us as well as the spectator.”<sup>502</sup>

Apart from the fabulation or de-realisation device, another possible reason for character anonymity is the metonymical position of the individual as the voice of the world: their singularity aside, characters are nameless tropes of universal humanity. In *Hiroshima mon amour* this could be a statement about the postwar West: people afflicted by a “functioning schizophrenia”, torn by the desire to unburden themselves of untold pain and untellable horrors, and the guilt in betraying that painful memory.<sup>503</sup> This reflects all life after trauma: pulling away from the loss, if at all possible, makes it difficult to access the pain that became definitive of the self. Perhaps this is what drew the Frenchwoman to cling to her own disfigurement – her shaved hair, her bleeding hands from scratching the cellar walls, her emotional scarring.<sup>504</sup> In this context Kristeva’s suggestion that “we are survivors, the living dead... harbouring our personal Hiroshima in the hollow of our private world” rather overstretched universalism.<sup>505</sup> In seeing the ‘survivors’ as all humanity after Hiroshima, Kristeva presumed to ventriloquise the real survivors, the Holocaust’s ‘living dead’, and to appropriate their shattered experience as a lesson and a badge. She overlooked the gulf of identification categorically distinguishing survivors from the rest, who can only approximate them with imagination and empathy. It is perhaps more appropriate to see the France-Japan link as a memory-by-analogy, whereby the foreign disaster made universal facilitates French negotiations of French pasts, which by their very parity with Hiroshima are revealed as the real subject of the film.<sup>506</sup>

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<sup>502</sup> Wilson, 11. Quoted from Alain Resnais, “*Hiroshima mon amour: A Composite Interview with Alain Resnais*” in Robert Hughes (ed.), *Film: Book 2: Films of Peace and War* (New York and London: Grove Press, 1962), 63.

<sup>503</sup> Keith Cohen, “Pleasures of Voicing: Oral Intermittences in Two Films by Alain Resnais,” *L’Esprit Créateur* XXX, 2 (Summer 1990), 65.

<sup>504</sup> Deborah Lesko Baker, “Memory, Love, and Inaccessibility in *Hiroshima mon amour*,” *Marguerite Duras Lives On*, ed. by Janine Ricouart (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1998), 30.

<sup>505</sup> Kristeva, 151.

<sup>506</sup> See Nancy Wood, *Vectors of Memory: Legacies of Trauma in Postwar Europe* (Oxford: Berg, 1999), 185-193.

The theme of the presence of death within life as permanent wound is apparent in *Hiroshima mon amour* in several ways.<sup>507</sup> Most obviously, the doubling of the German lover in/by the Japanese lover is a symbolic reincarnation of death in life. As She repeatedly puts it, this is a devouring passion: “*tu me tues, tu me fais du bien*” (115).<sup>508</sup> Because She loves a dead man (the German lover), the image of her living lover (the Japanese) blends with that of the dead one, as another instance of a desire for the impossible, leading Kristeva to ask rhetorically of the film’s title, “is my love a Hiroshima or do I love Hiroshima because its pain is my eros?”<sup>509</sup> If the desire for death is symbolically the desire for alterity, the doubled lovers are unsurprisingly outsiders: both are not French, and both have paid a price for being on the side of the ‘enemy’. She, too, paid a price for her interaction with the other side in being ‘buried alive’ in her parents’ cellar and being erased from Nevers when her parents pretended she had died. Her recollection and expression of that experience are severely disrupted by her madness then: she was alive, but socially and affectively dead, as something in her had died with her German lover. While her pain and wounds confirmed her physical being, her life was filled, even reasoned, by mourning. Striving to survive their dead love, She became *like* a dead woman, socially and temporally dissociated, fascinated and identified with the object of her mourning.<sup>510</sup>

Symbolically, death-within-life is analogous to a broader theme, that of ‘having’ and losing, presence and absence (or lack), going well beyond the

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<sup>507</sup> It is perhaps unsurprising, considering Duras’s quasi-Heideggerian existentialism: “Death, the fact of death coming towards you, is also a memory. Like the present. It’s completely here, like the memory of what has already happened and the thought of what is still to come.” Marguerite Duras, *Practicalities: Marguerite Duras Speaks to Jérôme Beaujour*, trans. by Barbara Bray (London: Flamingo/HarperCollins, 1990), 64 [Originally titled *La Vie matérielle*].

<sup>508</sup> Nancy Lane, “The Subject in/of History: *Hiroshima Mon Amour*,” *Literature and Film in the Historical Dimension*, ed. by John D. Simons (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994), 91.

<sup>509</sup> Kristeva, 142.

<sup>510</sup> Kristeva, 143. Then again, in psychoanalysis mourning is always in a problematic relationship with its ‘origin’/source, as with representation; cf. Sharon Willis, *Marguerite Duras: Writing on the Body* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 58, 60.

interpersonal relations between the Frenchwoman and her doubled lovers. Hiroshima in the film signifies ‘nothing’, that is, both nil (*rien*) and nothingness (*le néant*), and its traces as seen by Her are illegible, traces of nothing.<sup>511</sup> This is another way to read the Japanese lover’s resistance of Her attempts at signification: “*tu n’as rien vu à Hiroshima*” (she later names him Hiroshima, an avatar of the dead). The horrific devastation of Hiroshima is thus not only the horror of brutality but also the *horror of the void*. It exerts immense pressure on Her: on what she takes as her self, on the validity of her experience and memory, on her understanding of event and history. Duras and Resnais chose not to resolve this impasse: Duras in her unredemptive, aporetic narrative, and Resnais in simply questioning the knowability of the past and distrusting narrativisation of experience.<sup>512</sup>

The obverse of death-in-life, as the human condition of the post-traumatic survivor, is life-in-death – the continuation of the past and its dead through remembrance, and the issue of memory and forgetting it raises. Remembrance is broadly therapeutic, allowing the past to be recovered adequately and to be overcome in order for the rest of life to move on and not be stuck in repetition. Yet some memory is literally mute – unuttered, unutterable – like Her memory of Nevers. This muteness could be the ‘trace of an absence’ of which Kristeva writes, appearing as the ‘nothing’ constantly evoked in the plot, which fails (or perhaps succeeds) in being expressed.<sup>513</sup> The Frenchwoman’s suffering, muted in Nevers, is given a voice in her narration at the riverside café, and in what it enables her to do: to plot her personal history, seemingly unintelligible to her until it was recounted.<sup>514</sup> The apparent futility of her efforts to encompass her past trauma stokes a passion, perhaps an obsession, with doing just that: trying repeatedly to express this *histoire* (as story and as history).<sup>515</sup>

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<sup>511</sup> Lane, 96.

<sup>512</sup> Dana Strand, ““Documenting” the National Past in French Film,” *Pacific Coast Philology* 39 (2004), 24. The failure to perform, repeat or access that which may not even be there may be explained as a symptom of Freudian hysteria; Willis, 33-34, 37.

<sup>513</sup> Kristeva, 146, 151.

<sup>514</sup> Lane, 93.

<sup>515</sup> Willis, 35.



Precisely because this recollection is performative, indeed discursive, it relies considerably on the participation and actuation of an interlocutor. Gilles Deleuze suggested that here, with “two incommensurable regions of past, Hiroshima and Nevers”, and as the Japanese man refuses the Frenchwoman’s entry into his region of memory, She must draw him willingly into hers, thus creating in a sense a ‘memory for two’, independent of their respective persons.<sup>516</sup> She might like to do so: as co-subject, the Japanese lover would thus help her shoulder its burden (which he does anyway by helping her tell her story); he would also be an object of that memory (as the dead German’s double). This is consistent with a broader tendency, which Lynn Higgins called a ‘Durassian *fantasme fondamental*’: the centrality of the collapse of difference – temporal (concerning before and after, past and present), cultural, and most importantly personal, biographical – and its figuration as both desired and feared.<sup>517</sup> This explains the situated character of remembrance in *Hiroshima mon amour*. Hiroshima as a *lieu de mémoire* is like a Benjaminian allegorical ruin: simultaneously difference unfolded and difference collapsed, its hollowed-out presence is both signified and signifier. By seeing the place and the trace, She thinks she recovered the past and has ‘seen everything at Hiroshima.’<sup>518</sup> But unlike Benjamin’s allegory, what is recovered here is not necessarily enlightening: memory in itself, painful and at times barely intelligible, does not help the Frenchwoman.

Memory and forgetting in *Hiroshima mon amour* are both deeply ambiguous, being each a metaphor for both death and rebirth. Remembering is both a conquest of death-in-oblivion and a death in reasserting the loss of the German lover, fuelling a death wish (as identification with the object of loss). Forgetting is analogous to real death as both are discontinuities, but it also leaves the past behind, giving hope for a resumption of ‘normal’ life. *Hiroshima mon amour* probably foregrounds forgetting at least as much as it does memory. It was suggested that in her recovery as subject the Frenchwoman must move on from her site of remembrance and efface Hiroshima (her lover and the city). As

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<sup>516</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (London: The Athlone Press, 1989), 117-118.

<sup>517</sup> Higgins, 56; Willis, 51.

<sup>518</sup> Lane, 95.

she finishes expressing her narrative, in an alcohol-induced trance-like state, all that remains for her is the memory of her failure of memory. Her voice lingers as the picture moves on, saying (perhaps in internal monologue), “look how I forget you... look how I’ve forgotten you. Look at me” (110). The act of remembering becomes the moment of loss, death and forgetting. Her forgetting already blurs the Japanese lover who still sits across from her, looking at her, touching her: her re-emergence into the present is as much a *lieu de mémoire* as it is a *lieu d’oubli*, and that forgetting is already concerned mainly with itself.<sup>519</sup>

Nevertheless, neither forgetting nor remembering is concerned with the self alone: the sense of the social or the collective is an integral part of individual memory, of biography; in Rousseau’s terms, ‘history’ is always already some part of ‘memory’. In this ‘age of testimony’ (following Elie Wiesel), the loss of individual subjectivity in the social function of telling may lead one to wonder whether anything other than collective experience can be represented.<sup>520</sup> But collective memory is a precarious, fluid nexus of representations and narratives prone to revision and elision in favour of the common ground. The Frenchwoman’s private memories and biography are embedded in public history, with which she must engage and make her own *histoire*; and yet she experiences the public past, like her Japanese lover, as a lived past (*le vécu*). As Sharon Willis has it, “the moment of trauma is situated at the intersection of historical and personal past, which throws into question both the public-private split... and our thinking of history as a set of events collectively produced and retroactively interpreted, narrated...” Historical referentiality crosses here the problems of psychic representation and of meaning. It remains hinged on intention, on the subjective will to remember and, in the case of collective memory, to turn *lieux d’histoire* into *lieux de mémoire*.<sup>521</sup>

The Frenchwoman’s private experience is linked with the wider social/public experience in a *chiasmus*: between public liberation and private

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<sup>519</sup> Lesko Baker, 33-35; Lane, 94; Wilson, 12; Willis, 42; Deleuze, 300 n. 28.

<sup>520</sup> Victoria Best and Kathryn Robson, “Memory and Innovation in Post-Holocaust France,” *French Studies* LIX, 1 (January 2005), 2; Lane suggested that, however diffusely, *Hiroshima mon amour* was Duras’s first work that foregrounded public (social, external, political) history; Lane, 90, 98.

<sup>521</sup> Willis, 24-25, 59; Higgins, 50; Wood, 3.

suffering (the tragic love story with the German); between private liberation and public suffering (Hiroshima's catastrophe as the context of the woman's self-assertion); and between private passion and public horror. Her personal tragedy in Nevers is doubled by a *social silencing* that defines her grief; the silence is only broken in a faraway land, thirteen years later, in confessing to a kind stranger, with his cajoling and a generous helping of dutch courage. Perhaps She needed to come this far to get something from social interactions that she could not get back in France, namely *sympathy* with her story, which Duras requires of her readers/viewers. She cannot speak out her grief in France because it is considered illegitimate, and if her grief work is as imbued with the social as her personal experience is, then the withheld social sanction obstructs her recovery, overcoming and commencement. This sense of social solitude, coupled by a sense of imprisonment, even claustrophobia, is one of the symptoms of a deeper sense of *alienation* writ large in *Hiroshima mon amour*.<sup>522</sup>

But what of the future? Since *Nuit et Brouillard* Resnais seemed to have become more pessimistic, and in *Hiroshima mon amour* he and Duras reaffirmed their belief that what had been is also what will be. Duras instructs that the film open with documentary images of the Bikini 'mushroom', the cloud towering over the thermonuclear test site in the South Pacific; the iconic image was to be simultaneously naturalised and denaturalised (22), and the viewers were to get the feeling of seeing this image again and of seeing it for the first time (21). Repetition seems inevitable, both as a repeated reduplication in space and as repetition in time, ending up with a picture of the hell of eternal return, the abyss of the same. This feeling of powerlessness in the face of history was shared by many French people in the mid-1950s and generally transcended generational divides.

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<sup>522</sup> Lane, 91; Lesko Baker, 32; Schulman, 17, 19; Yves Berger, "Marguerite Duras," in Bernard Pingaud, *Ecrivains d'aujourd'hui 1940-1960* (Paris, 1962), 207-209.

### ***Summary: The Present Too is a Foreign Country***

The issue of national identity is sensitive to challenges, not least because, as 'imagined community', it is a construct, a narrativisation of social reality and hegemonic fantasy, sustained by 'collective memory' which is inevitably at odds with personal recollection.<sup>523</sup> One reason that the postwar period was associated with decline in British and French imaginary is the transformation of the interwar social and discursive order. Considering the centrality of class in Britain, this was related to the erosion of the status of the old middle class, and the dismantling of the empire that sustained the old social order. Considering the centrality of France as nation and republic in its own public discourse, this was related to the failure of successive regimes to maintain France's proud image of itself, be it in Vichy collaboration or in the Fourth Republic's mishandling of colonial crises. The association of the postwar period with decline led to two contrasting reactions to the preceding wartime period: the British, who saw it as 'their finest hour', sought to perpetuate wartime mentality and the impression of war; the French, divided and shamed by their wartime experience, sought to escape it.

British postwar cultural pessimism with regard to national identity has several narratives embedded in it. Firstly, the narrative of 'culture under threat' was a conservative sentiment with regard to an extinct grand-bourgeois hegemony, informed in no small part by nostalgia for an imagined virtuous, rural, pre-industrial past. The threat in this sense was to established, hegemonic culture and its beneficiaries, the old middle class, whose hold on universities and 'high' culture seemed to be weakened by the increasing involvement of the working class in British mainstream culture. The Leavisite reaction in the Two Cultures debate exemplified this defensive attitude in the face of the 'threat' from science, although elsewhere, regarding the primacy of traditional realism, Leavis and Snow were in accord, attacked together by Wilson as parochial and obstructing creativity. The 'crisis in the humanities' discourse suggests a similar sense of threat, but it is unclear whether it is a threat to the status of the

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<sup>523</sup> The term is taken from Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. edn (London: Verso, 1991 [1983]), 5-7.

humanities (as with the Two Cultures) or to their old purpose as part of the establishment (in favour of the critical role of covering British society's 'absent centre'). The resultant declinist *mentalité* was primarily elitist and change-averse, even when that change involved academic expansion or greater public access to culture, through the custody of the Third Programme and the Arts Council. It manifested itself in the siege mentality of ivory-tower elitists like Leavis, as well as in the sense of disorientation of more public-oriented intellectuals like Plumb.

Secondly, the secret and hitherto unexplored nature of Englishness itself came under scrutiny: as pointed out by Anderson and Collini, the idea of national entity was a French obsession and was something the British had never needed to contemplate seriously. The very 'discovery' cast it as already endangered and in need of a nostalgic endeavour to reference it in order to validate it. This view was influenced by the Leavisite culturalist turn in academic English studies which, together with Keynes's perception of British decolonisation as an opportunity for national revival, informed the cultural studies endeavour of rediscovering demetropolitanised England. Drawing more popular attention to Englishness were the activities of the National Trust, which sought to salvage and conserve the endangered 'heritage' embodying national 'spirit'. The evolution of a 'heritage industry' in the model of the National Trust is one manifestation of this 'invention of tradition' in the absent centre of culture; fictionally, the heritage fetish of identity (like the fetish of alterity of modernist primitivism) was gently mocked by Wilson in the picture of Anglo-Saxon attitudes that are merely projections, covering for no 'essence', either in the far past or in the present. Wilson's bitterness reflected his frustration with this convenient nostalgic hypocrisy which, when massified, became part of a 'bread and circuses' perception of the past.

French postwar cultural pessimism regarding national identity was tied up with some of its own, more general narratives. Firstly, a particularly great challenge was posed by the need to re-establish continuity with the French past to validate the present, what Collini called its 'tradition of memory'. Collective self-definition had been a French republican obsession as a polity founded on eternal, absolute ideals – contrasting with recurrent political convulsions of one *directoire*, two monarchies, two empires and five republics. But the real legacy of contempt was that of the *années noires*, from the 'strange defeat' of 1940 to

the Liberation, which was a definitive fault line in French historical-cultural continuity and so sensitive that the mere reference to it, as Rousso showed, was topical. This 'Vichy Syndrome' regarding the past touched on what Duhamel defined as the French fear of decline, and remained profoundly influential on contesting postwar French national narratives and their outlooks on the future. The mutually constitutive narratives of Gaullist authoritarianism, French Communism, conservative social democracy and traditionalist reactionary Poujadism carried with them divergent prescriptions for French cohesion. Of these, the Gaullist line emerged triumphant, delegitimizing Communist and traditionalist-nationalist narratives as splinter narratives and, as the Frenchwoman's story in *Hiroshima mon amour* shows, overriding personal memory by collective remembrance. For a while, the contesting national narratives seemed to agree on a definition of France's limits as an empire, but this agreement was fractured as the Algerian war wore on. Algeria turned out to be as contested as Vichy, drawing on French nationalism, colonialism and racism, and directly affecting fears for French difference and collective definition.

Secondly, the discourse that in Britain was shaped by the defence of 'endangered culture' was in France associated with a brash 'newness'. The *nouvelle vague* as the generational mentality of postwar youths, so different to their elders, joined the New Novel and its New Critique, and cinematic New Wave, and presented a picture of irreverence for tradition and authority that threatened orthodoxy. Postwar French youths, as will be discussed in chapter 5, felt their own value but also their own powerlessness to influence public affairs, a political aspect of cultural pessimism which led to their 'abstentionism'. As for the practitioners of the new ventures, they were acutely aware of their belated place with regard to tradition, 'standing on the shoulders of giants' and being defined by the tradition they criticised while attempting to take it beyond its impasse of representations of reality. These representations, as Sarraute, Robbe-Grillet and Barthes were fully aware, were mystifications that manipulated the public image and 'collective memory' of the past and present, not least through the Gaullist myth, which they and others opposed politically.

French and British varieties of postwar cultural pessimism share the common concern with a crisis in the representation of reality, past and present,

and a crisis of prospective and ideal (utopian) thought. Marwick, Gasiorek and Kumar reiterate the link between a social crisis and a semiotic crisis outlined more generally by Jameson and White. In Britain, the Movement reflected this crisis in fiction, as did working-class 'kitchen sink' writing and the middle-class fiction of Angus Wilson. *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes* in particular presents the crisis of representation as multiple: the liberal crisis of individual self-representation, and the crisis of collective self-representation in the received, projected notions of Englishness. Wilson's failed attempt at a 'Dickensian' 'condition of England' novel, together with the restricted social settings of mid-1950s new fiction both instantiate an inability to provide comprehensive realist narratives of contemporary British society. The French semiotic crisis was painful because the necessary reformulation of France and Frenchness also implied the critique of republicanism and imperialism and an admission of France's shrinking size and importance. The Gaullist myth invoked French 'destiny' and 'grandeur' to cover both faults, de-realising the image of France until it was abstract enough to be acceptable. The Algerian war was also a site of recruiting political and ideological traditions to shape the changing circumstances of colonialism, invoking them as 'heritage', as nostalgic foil and as a nationalist fantasy. *Hiroshima mon amour* was another attempt to 'de-realise' experience, by which Duras and Resnais sought to articulate the unsaid: to make 'holocaustal events' like Hiroshima, and by analogy French personal and national traumas, representable through 'modernist narratives'. Neither was convinced that their rendering was successful, and this collaboration reflects their pessimistic anxiety that such catastrophes might repeat themselves. Underlying it is a technological pessimism regarding the means that sustained the nuclear age and its 'assured destruction', being the manifestation of a general disillusionment with human technological progress.

## Section 3: Cultural Pessimism, Modernisation and Youth Culture

Preceding sections presented literary works that were more or less contemporaneous. Due to the wider time gap between them (over a decade), works discussed in this section are presented chronologically. This also allows me to suggest a frame to the period discussed, with Vian's novel reflecting the immediate postwar experience, and MacInnes's envisioning the shape of things to come in the early 1960s.

### ***Chapter 5: France – The Big Leap***

French youths were to a great degree misunderstood by their elders, whom they did not seek to emulate. The widening generation gap was aggravated for older observers by a whole new postwar socioeconomic order, enabled by France's rapid reconstruction and modernisation. Wanting to turn their backs on the Second World War, and decidedly unattached to the interwar order, French youths who matured into the new reality were ready adopters of the elements informing it: American popular culture, consumerism, and the new symbolic order they brought with them.

To some extent the changing profile of French youth was anticipated, and it was addressed in several studies of the period, of which Giroud's *La Nouvelle vague* is but one.<sup>524</sup> In these studies the new 'youth culture' was seen to be culturally materialist and politically abstentionist; both traits could have been mitigated by considering the wider social context of France at the time, but that was not always done. Instead, the compensation for French youths' perceived decline came in the form of reiteration of the great hopes attached to them as agents of the nation's future – a future which the sociologist Edgar Morin saw as

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<sup>524</sup> See the second part of chapter 4 above, introducing Giroud's study with her *L'Express* work.



the juvenilisation of all contemporary culture.<sup>525</sup> The extent of young people's estrangement from French traditions as from the politics of the time was, in retrospect, underestimated: later, this frustration at their relative deprivation in political and social representation erupted in the student revolt of 1968.

To understand the factors informing the postwar cultural experience in France generally and among French youths in particular, this chapter will survey the ways in which France's modernised new order was shaped by the adoption of American industrial, commercial and cultural models, and how this was linked to another important trend, French decolonisation. The hostile reception of youth culture reflected anxieties about American-style modernisation and the reformulation of France as a decolonised nation-state. The chapter will conclude with a consideration of Boris Vian's experimental novel *L'Écume des jours*. This novel and the context of its production – the immediate postwar period – help illuminate the French anticipations of change at the end of the Second World War and the frustration of these expectations under the Fourth and early Fifth Republics.

## Youth as Cult and Reality

In the postwar climate of rapid cultural and economic change, the difference between generations seemed more acute than ever. This gave rise to a mystification, almost a cult, of youth. More than before, the transitory period of adolescence was prized as a kind of paradise, distinct from the corruption of maturity and embodying all the hopes and future prospects of a fractured continent. The adult perspective valorised youth precisely because it inevitably represented what was lost.<sup>526</sup> From an adult perspective, the fascination and preoccupation with youth was connected to the cultural-pessimistic trope of belatedness: the *déjà vu* sense of living in an ageing world in which time and innovation seem to accelerate, leaving the adult observer behind. The belated perspective on youth also enabled them to be seen as inevitably, eventually corrupted and menacing: older observers no longer recognised themselves in

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<sup>525</sup> Edgar Morin, *L'Esprit du temps: Essai sur la culture de masse* (Paris: Grasset, 1962).

<sup>526</sup> See Davies, 246-256; and sporadic suggestions in chapters 3 and 4 of Christopher Robinson, *French Literature in the Twentieth Century* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1980).

their juniors, and this led to suspicion and to a rejection of the familiar projected innocence and promise of youth. This estrangement worked both ways: postwar youths were more inclined to distance themselves from their elders and create for themselves a new, 'young world', of which they were in command.

The common perception of postwar France was that it was an old and tired country that had lost its confidence.<sup>527</sup> Such views in turn animated the French drive for a lengthy and all-encompassing process of modernisation – of industry, of economy, of cultural and general consumption. Even in the early 1960s the issue was seen starkly as either “‘breaking through’ to modernity or declining.”<sup>528</sup> In popular imagination the link between modernisation and the reinvigoration of France itself, as a state and nation, gained ground. Yet France’s drive to recapture its vitality, its youthfulness – to ‘marry its century’ – still acknowledged a certain lag that France needed to cover, and which was felt to be precarious. Inconveniently, France’s economic recovery and industrial modernisation relied extensively on American aid. Furthermore, in modernisation’s wake, the growing affluence of French youths increasingly offered them the opportunities to be less financially dependent on their elders and thereby to maintain cultural autonomy. By the end of the 1950s a distinct and ‘Americanised’ youth culture had arisen, which attracted considerable popular and scholarly interest from the outset.

Sociological surveys of French youth started appearing in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The overall impression in reading these publications, notes Marwick, is that French youth were considered primarily as adults-in-waiting, in the same way they had in the interwar periods and before. They were either seen to have ‘eternal problems’ that all youngsters before them had encountered, or some note was taken of the peculiarities of the current generation’s behaviour, in order to speculate about their potential influence as they matured.<sup>529</sup> Journalism and art, on the other hand, responded quickly to the distinct cultural shift of postwar youths. Discernible youth subcultures were of course nothing new: during the war ‘*zazous*’ – among them Boris Vian, discussed below – had

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<sup>527</sup> Henri Perruchot, *La France et sa jeunesse* (Paris: Hachette/Les Grands problèmes, 1958), 31.

<sup>528</sup> *Searching for the New France*, ed. by James F. Hollifield and George Ross (New York: Routledge, 1991), 5.

<sup>529</sup> Marwick, *Sixties*, 96.

celebrated spontaneous young life with clandestine parties and gatherings where they would listen to swing music and dance, all in defiance of Occupation restrictions. Frowned upon during the occupation, after the Liberation the *zazous* came to epitomise the pursuit of careless happiness among Parisian youths, and an anti-Vichy celebration of jazz, café society, existentialism and liberal sexuality, all in the name of fun.<sup>530</sup>

The *zazous* were to a degree a taste of things to come, in that their rebellion was not so much against wartime restrictions as against all traditionally repressive authority; and in that their protest and alternative lifestyle did not discernibly present a consistent ideological alternative. This mindset certainly persisted and intensified over the thirteen years between the Liberation and the publication of the first popular accounts of youth culture, Henri Perruchot's *La France et sa jeunesse* (1957), Françoise Giroud's *La Nouvelle Vague* (1958, see my earlier comments on this), and Edgar Morin's celebrated *L'Esprit du temps* (1962).<sup>531</sup> It was this defiant restlessness that the French government wanted to appropriate and co-opt. One way to do so was to better gauge public opinion through a national 'soft statistics office', the French Institute of Public Opinion (IFOP), which lent itself to part of Giroud's 1958 study as well as to Jacques Duquesne's 1961 survey, *Les 16-24 Ans*; another way, favoured by the Gaullist regime, was to influence the representation of youth in a triumphalist way, with government publications stressing the innovation and optimism of French youth, as well as the integral part they played in French society, rather than opposing it or revolting against it.<sup>532</sup>

Two things about French youths became clear at the turn of the 1960s: first, that there was a distinct subculture with its own values, norms and symbols; and secondly, that before they became participants in civic life, French youths were already part of its economy, distinguished among other ways by their own

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<sup>530</sup> David Meakin, *Vian: L'Ecume des jours* (Glasgow: University of Glasgow French and German Publications, 1996), 2.

<sup>531</sup> Perruchot's journalistic essay incorporated an empirical, quantitative element, based on two surveys conducted in early 1957 by the reviews *Arts* and *Les Nouvelles littéraires*; Morin, the academic sociologist, produced a more speculative account of mass culture and its elements, one of which was youth culture, as the kernel of a general juvenilisation of popular culture.

<sup>532</sup> Marwick, *Sixties*, 97-98.

consumption patterns. Around 1958-9 rock'n'roll, or *yéyé*, as it came to be known in France, reached such a level of popularity as to supersede jazz as the young music of choice, only a short time after it had caught on in the United States and in Britain. From the autumn of 1959 this new musical taste was purveyed to French youth audiences by a pioneering radio programme, *Salut les copains*, on the commercial Radio Europe Number 1, which won immediate popularity due not only to demand but to its attempts to involve its young target audience in, for instance, the compilation of play lists. Taking matters further, the programme's initiator and presenter, Daniel Filipacchi, set up *Salut les copains* the colour magazine, again dedicated to *les teenagers* and again promising them their own say in a forum that, for a change, knew them and understood them. It came as no surprise that within a year the *SLC* magazine reached a circulation of one million copies and spawned imitator-rivals sponsored by both the PCF (*Nous les garçons et les filles*) and the Catholic Church (*Coeurs vaillants* and *Ames vaillantes*, followed by *J2 Jeunesse* and *J2 Magazine*). Nevertheless, Marwick claims, it was radio, a more accessible form of mass communication (*SLC* could be picked up as far away as Algeria), which was the more influential medium in disseminating youth culture.<sup>533</sup>

A popular impression formed in the early 1960s, driven in no small part by sensationalist journalism, that the 'new generation' (the 'Twist generation' and later the '*yéyé* generation') was conspicuously materialistic and consumerist in its approach, and that it viewed money – while corrupting – as the most important means of serving a growing trend of individualism. But the so-called 'inheritors of culture' were not completely devoid of a sense of social responsibility. Giroud's survey, however crude, gives a sense of the complexity of the young mindset in 1958: to begin with, 85% of them thought that life was good in France, and 96% pointed to politics as the foremost negative element of French life, in particular the issues of the Algerian war, government instability and state finances. Yet when asked what they felt they were lacking or were being deprived of, the answers were predominantly non-political: holidays, a car, entertainment and home appliances. 91% of French 18-30 year-olds considered faithfulness essential, but only to another person in a romantic context, not to an

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<sup>533</sup> Marwick, *Sixties*, 101-108.

ideal or to the state; only 6% declared they were willing to risk their lives for their country and, in fact, 42% stated flatly that there was no cause at all for which it was justifiable to risk their lives.<sup>534</sup> Perruchot had arrived at roughly the same conclusion, linking young people's political 'abstentionism' first to their impression of having been deceived by ideologies both left and right, and then to the individualism they developed through having no example or model in their elders, who had allowed them an unprecedented amount of freedom early in life.<sup>535</sup>

The young people in Perruchot's book wanted to see France change direction but were discouraged by the lack of vision and enthusiasm in French public life, which they saw as dishonest, unprincipled, egotistical and self-satisfied. Yet, in summing up his discussion of youth and politics, Perruchot noted that young people were generally confident in the future, that is, in themselves.<sup>536</sup> In presenting her survey, Giroud, too, took the opportunity to put a positive spin on her outlook and praise the transformative power of individual action, evoking the film *Twelve Angry Men* shown in France at the time (aptly, a popular, American film), in the face of what seemed in her results like a growing political apathy.<sup>537</sup> Yet, as Marwick points out, viewed from without, France and its youth appeared more politicised than Britain and hers: while in Britain the Suez crisis of 1956 and the newly established CND did not seem to mobilise the majority of the public – although the latter was popular among young people, as the next chapter shows – French youth politics was highly animated by the Algerian campaign, the republican crisis and Gaullist authoritarianism. This could be attributed to a greater deference on the part of British youth. Another possible explanation, suggested by Marwick, is that French protests were simply more dramatic where repression or education were at stake, mobilised by student sections of political parties or by the national student union (UNEF), and aggravated by increasing police brutality, evident in the police march on the National Assembly building in March 1958, in the abduction of Mehdi Ben

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<sup>534</sup> Giroud, 10, 14-15; for the questionnaire and the full breakdown of responses see 27-31, 331-338.

<sup>535</sup> Perruchot, 18, 20-21, 38, 41.

<sup>536</sup> Perruchot, 30-31, 33-34.

<sup>537</sup> Giroud, 17-18.

Barka by the Paris police in 1959, and most memorably in the February 1962 police charge on a crowd of demonstrators in an anti-OAS demonstration, leading to the death of nine at the Charonne métro station.<sup>538</sup> It seems clear that during the 1950s French youth were not completely disengaged from formal politics, even if many of them (35% according to Giroud's survey) said that 'people like them' were unable to influence the course of events in France.

Politically engaged or not, French youth felt themselves to a great degree misunderstood and misrepresented by their elders, who either through traditional gloom, seeing them 'in gangs' or 'in despair', or through an outraged sensationalism, took their individualism to be a sign of selfishness, their more relaxed attitude to sex as loose morals, and their general appearance and demeanour as an ominous indicator for the future.<sup>539</sup> Their ways were increasingly seen as impenetrably foreign to French custom. The methods used to analyse French youth betray a traditionalist bias: beyond the crude parameters of gender and marital status, it is their occupation that is taken as their main identity factor – secondary school pupils, university students, agricultural workers, blue-collar workers and white-collar workers. Furthermore, even if a growing

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<sup>538</sup> Marwick, 100-101. As a union UNEF was part of the labour movement, that is, of the political left, and defined students as 'young intellectual workers'. While the Métro Charonne event is memorable to any academic scholar of French contemporary history, to this day it is absent from French secondary school history textbooks. It was alluded to in Perec's 1967 novel *Un Homme qui dort* and later memorialised in Didier Daeninckx's *Meurtres pour mémoire* (1984).

<sup>539</sup> This seemingly blasé attitude was probably part of a youthful search for 'authentic' identity in the face of alienation, as Edgar Morin later recorded. In the 1950s this contributed to the popularity of Angry Young Men fiction in France. John Wain's *Hurry On Down* (1953) became *Les Diplômes de la vie* (Hachette, 1953); Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* (1954) was *Jim-la-Chance* (Plon, 1956); John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1956) was staged in 1958 at the Théâtre des Mathurins as *La Paix du dimanche* and later published as *Le Jeune Homme en colère* (Gallimard, 1962); and the film adaptation of John Braine's *Room at the Top* (1957, film 1960), which starred Simone Signoret, crossed the Channel as *Les Chemins de la haute ville*. However, on the whole, French readers were not impressed by the novels' insularity and highly context-specific references: see Françoise du Sorbier, "Jeunes Gens en colère," in *Les Années 50*, ed. by Jacques Demarcq (Paris: Editions du Centre Pompidou, 1988), 446-447. Perhaps Angry literature was a passing fad in France as it had been in Britain, a less attractive alternative to American culture.

minority within French society were of different ethnicity or religion, this was ignored in favour of the assumption that French youth were all native metropolitan Christians.<sup>540</sup> This was despite a constant immigrant influx from North Africa (not just Algeria) and from the rest of the French empire (later the French Community), who for the most part found themselves in *bidonvilles*, detached from the organic urban centres. From the early 1960s, French students faced a similar problem: the late war and postwar baby boom created shortages first in urban housing, then in places in elementary and secondary education and social services, and then in higher education. To cater for growing numbers of students new self-enclosed university campuses were built outside big cities: the University of Paris X campus at Nanterre is a prime example, built in the middle of a remote *bidonville*. As habitats they were mostly detached and offered only teaching and housing solutions, with inadequate transport links and no culture or diversions to speak of.

The Nanterre campus was also the workplace of the sociologist Alain Touraine, whose concept of 'dependent participation', mentioned in the introduction above, encapsulated the predicament of postwar French youths. Students were not the only ones who answered de Gaulle's call for citizens to 'participate', only to find their ways of participating severely limited. This was also the case for rural youths seeking urban employment, as well as for young urban working couples, who were ushered out to new suburban housing estates, finding soulless and cramped concrete blocks with scant leisure provisions and the added necessity of commuting to work.<sup>541</sup> These real-life experiences inspired widespread discontent among young people. Needing to wait until they were 21 to vote, they were unhappy with being made to defer to state authority – traditionally a centralist *étatisme* and later Gaullist paternalism – which, on its own part, provided for them and their advancement quite insufficiently. French youths were still at the charge of decision makers who were their elders, who regarded them as different and saw their economic performance – gainful

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<sup>540</sup> To this day, France in fact prohibits the collection of data related to ethnicity and religion that might be used for profiling population. This policy rules out official acknowledgment of systematic discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, as well as any 'affirmative action' to redress it.

<sup>541</sup> Kedward, 402, 404-405.

employment and consumer spending – as the chief measure of their participation.<sup>542</sup>

The regularities of young economic participation sparked the sociologist Edgar Morin's interest and became an important part of his cultural study, *L'Esprit du temps*. Morin saw 'mass culture', a term that he borrowed from American sociology, as being on the ascendancy in the West and particularly in France in the postwar period, a change that was initially restricted to quantitative transformations in material parameters but that caused a slow qualitative metamorphosis of modern culture as it had been known until the 1930s. This new mass culture consisted in providing private individuals with images and models that formed their aspirations in the world, as well as their escapes from everyday reality. Both integration in the world and escape from it were framed by mass culture in terms of acquisition and consumption, promising an earthly paradise in which everyone can take part. The rise in Western standards of living had shifted the concerns of many from the elementary desire to make a living to less immediate concerns such as social standing, wellbeing, love and happiness. These last two are of particular importance: the euphoric mythology of happiness became the leitmotiv of Western civilisation; likewise, modern love, neither courtly nor romantic, was elevated in mass culture, as the very kernel of human existence, the ultimate accomplishment. The ideal of love also provided symbolic support for a social shift: in the gradual erosion of the nuclear family, the ideal of love exalted the young couple (*jeune ménage*) – a man and a woman alone, being their own family to each other and searching for self-fulfilment.<sup>543</sup> A literary precursor of the centrality of the young couple is discussed below in Vian's *L'Ecume des jours*.

Modern mass culture, Morin claimed, was dominated by a new trinity of aspirational goals – love, beauty, youth – which framed the new model figure of the *juvenile adult*. The authority of old age had eroded; adult age was juvenilised in the pursuit of total love and euphoric happiness *à l'américaine*; and the

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<sup>542</sup> Kedward, 414.

<sup>543</sup> The symbolic promotion of the idea of the couple as a new elementary social unit in American cinema of the 1950s is discussed below. Morin, 116-117, 167-188. He also offers a Freudian explanation for the suspicious but ultimately deferential attitude of young people, who 'rebel' against France by abstentionism and withdrawal. Morin, 204-207.



paradigm of this youthfulness was not to be found in adolescence. The juvenile adult *qua* adolescent still searched for ‘real life’ and showed a great need for what some might call authenticity, a need apparent in his refusal of taboos and of interpersonal relations that are hypocritical or conventional. Adolescence had become the fulcrum of modern mass culture, and correspondingly it was youth that felt most strongly the call to modernity. This affected older culture adversely: as culture advanced but aged, it compensated by aspiring to be younger. In other words, not only was old age devalued, but so too was the accumulated experience of culture for which it stood losing its appeal. In its stead, the adherence to movement, that is, updating and conforming, became the supreme imperative.<sup>544</sup> The symbolic imperatives of flexibility and mobility corresponded to the material requirements of the modernised French market.

The understanding of mass culture as a wholly negative force of social decay provided a new twist to the old ‘bread and circuses’ adage. This context is twofold – the belatedness of culture and its disavowal of that belatedness in the idealisation of youth. The experience of belatedness is that of the acceleration of time, a sense of a dynamic history in flux that only allows for a precarious and perishable culture that is in constant rupture with its past. This modernised mass culture, made in the image of the ‘juvenile adult’, was characterised by a mode of participation that Morin calls ‘ludic-aesthetic’: middle-aged adolescents toying with the spectacle of culture for the sake of their own gratification.<sup>545</sup> For Morin and observers like him (such as Baudrillard) youth as cultural paradigm was a menacing prospect.

## Effects of French Modernisation and Americanisation

French modernisation is of particular relevance to the experience of French postwar youth because of two main phenomena informing it: decolonisation and Americanisation. Decolonisation was already discussed above in chapter 4 in the context of nationhood; in this chapter it is presented as the complement of what was effectively an *inward colonisation* of French popular culture by a state-

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<sup>544</sup> Morin, 209-215.

<sup>545</sup> Morin, 230.

administered, heightened capitalist system. Young people in France as elsewhere were the foremost agents of this modernisation; as Lefebvre noted early on (see above, chapter 2), they also bore the brunt of it.<sup>546</sup> The French national obsession with American cultural influences as the face of modernisation also had particular relevance for French youth. Americanisation carried the added significance of an alternative cultural template to still-traditional France, promising to update Frenchness as it updated – and diversified – France. Therefore, modernisation was not simply related to the new economic circumstances of widening affluence: it ushered in a new cultural order, which seemed to offer more room and opportunity for young people, who from the outset were more open to this change. Directly and indirectly, then, modernisation and its interconnected epiphenomena informed the circumstances and experiences of postwar French youths.

What might seem evident now, but was perhaps less clear in the postwar years and then later in their historiography, is the strong connection between France's modernisation and its decolonisation. For decades French observers viewed the two phenomena separately: there seemed little to connect the process of decolonisation, which for France unfolded messily and painfully over decades, and modernisation, which by its nature was future-oriented and disregarded the past and its legacy. The separation preserved the Algerian war as a distinct, nameless event that was separate from the main plot of France's grand historical narrative. This also allowed for French modernisation to be viewed discretely and, at least until 1974, affirmatively in its own right. Nevertheless, France's decolonisation and modernisation are two aspects of the same social-economic-cultural process of advanced capitalism (obscured by their separation), relinquishing the colonies abroad for what Situationists later called the 'colonisation of everyday life.'<sup>547</sup>

Kristin Ross's work on re-establishing this link between French modernisation and decolonisation goes to great lengths to demonstrate this *inward colonisation*, particularly of the symbolic order and in popular culture:

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<sup>546</sup> Lefebvre, "Everyday and Everydayness," 10-11.

<sup>547</sup> Michael Kelly, "Essay Review: Fast Cars, Clean Bodies," *French Cultural Studies* 6, 3, no. 18 (October 1995), 413-415.

advertising, popular song, women's magazines, fiction and journalism, and even theory. As well as the proliferation of cars, noted above in the introduction, she stresses the importance of the moving image, as epitomised in dynamic Hollywood films: "Their shared qualities – movement, image, mechanization, standardization – made movies and cars the key commodity-vehicles of a complete transformation in European consumption patterns and cultural habits."<sup>548</sup> With American goods and technology came also consumer market research and sector-focused advertising strategies that derived from it: home appliances advertising was aimed at women through women's magazines, which boomed after the war; car advertising was aimed at the male breadwinner, accentuating the ease of commuting it enabled, making its owner a better worker, an *homme disponible*.

Another crucial image was the emphasis and promotion of hygiene and cleanliness, the particularly evocative power of which was discussed, for instance, in Barthes's *Mythologies* essay on soaps and detergents. Commonly understood, there is an elision in hygiene metaphors between material cleaning, the expulsion of dirt, and moral cleansing, or the purge of evil and vice. As such, Ross's examples are fairly straightforward: the *épuration* of collaborators and with them the moral stain of Vichy; Paris councillor Marthe Richard's campaign to 'clean up the streets' of the city from prostitution; Alain Robbe-Grillet's 'cleaning of the stables' of realist fiction (discussed above); the establishment within the Ministry of Education of the *Bureau de propreté* to instruct people about modern standards of personal hygiene and domestic cleanliness; and the military 'clean-up' (*nettoyage*) campaigns aimed at Algerian nationalist resistance, as part of that *sale guerre* (dirty war).<sup>549</sup> The desire to possess clean commodities such as a shiny car had at its basis a desire to possess material which time does not affect, thus a desire to immobilise time itself and so to avoid decline and degradation.<sup>550</sup> Michael Kelly also notes the narcissistic element in the aspiration to cleanliness: it was, he argues, a desire to eliminate the otherness and resistance of the outside world so that, possessed and controlled, it would

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<sup>548</sup> Ross, *Fast Cars*, 33, 38.

<sup>549</sup> Ross, *Fast Cars*, chapter 2 (71-122).

<sup>550</sup> Ross, *Fast Cars*, 105-106, 213 n. 48; she cites Roland Barthes, "La Voiture, projection de l'égo," *Réalités* 213 (1963), 45.

reflect back a positive image of the Self.<sup>551</sup> Contentment and wellbeing derive from cleanliness, which in turn relies on (self-)control; what control France was losing on its African subjects, it was regaining among its metropolitan subjects.

Similarly, as in Algeria, 'the inhabitant in his home' was perceived to be the centre of the conflict, so the colonising campaign of modernisation targeted the domestic sphere. This cast the household – the young couple or nuclear family – as the basic unit of consumption, that is, of economic participation. The modernisation of the home was in its privatisation: the modern, urban, bourgeois home became the domain of an expanding leisure in retreat from the public loci and affairs of work/production and of politics. This myth of affective fulfilment within the *jeune ménage*, a mainstream, bourgeois 'ideal couple', compensated for the modernisation of the urban space, endlessly redeveloped with modern thoroughfares and slum clearance in the interests of hygiene and social control. City life became the face of society, and so being urban became a token of social participation, of being 'inside' society, within the space of the national collective self.<sup>552</sup>

The 'national middle class' was effectively the product of postwar French modernisation. It was essentially a social and political mainstream of complacent urban middle management, defined, like French youth, mainly by its purchasing power and consuming habits. This corresponds with the British experience: postwar affluence increased the general public interest in stability so as to sustain growth and enable individual social mobility. By 1960 social wellbeing improved so considerably – employment was high, real wages had risen by 40%, productivity soared by over 50% – that many considered French economic modernisation an 'event'. Emerging triumphant from this revolution, the bourgeoisie became the face of the French 'democracy of consumption'.<sup>553</sup> Neither productivity nor distribution of wealth was restored evenly and pauperisation only deepened – processes that concerned the young people Giroud surveyed.<sup>554</sup> Nevertheless, the French leap was heralded as a great success:

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<sup>551</sup> Kelly, "Essay Review: Fast Cars, Clean Bodies," 417.

<sup>552</sup> Ross, *Fast Cars*, chapter 3 (123-156).

<sup>553</sup> Kedward, 373-374; Ross, *Fast Cars*, 1-14.

<sup>554</sup> While aware of the opportunities in postwar modernisation (53% thought themselves luckier to live in that period), the kinds of injustice that most concerned the youths surveyed were

Monnet's contested *plan de modernisation et d'équipement*, which enabled the leap, faced up to the challenge Monnet himself had defined as 'modernisation or decadence'.<sup>555</sup> In fact, French modernisation was so successful that it brought not only a socioeconomic change but a cultural transformation – a mystification of modernity itself and the realignment of everyday life – as Ross's motifs of mobility and cleanliness demonstrate. Yet it was also a process fraught with anxieties and fears, giving rise to various forms of cultural pessimism.

To begin with, France's *rattrapage* gave rise to the most common strain of cultural pessimism, that of conservatism: modernisation clearly disrupted both historical continuity of identity (discussed in the previous chapter) and the traditional order, which still benefited the traditional elites, the clerical establishment, the *grande bourgeoisie* of the liberal professions, and wealthy land-owning farmers. Feeling most squeezed by modernisation, its most vocal opponents were the provincial small businessmen, represented by Poujade's UDCA, who were familiar with the old order and knew how to conduct themselves in it.<sup>556</sup> Part of the old order's familiarity was due to its distinctly primordial Frenchness: this explains the Poujadist compound of traditionalism, racism and imperialism, and suggests that its fear of change and the new was the horror of the loss of hegemony and difference. Still, Poujadists were not the only supporters of empire as part of the old order, and the postwar French imperial narrative was similarly conservative and paradoxical. Colonial subjects, particularly the Algerians, were considered transgressors for by wanting independence they were 'breaking up the family home' of the French empire and 'airing dirty laundry in public'. To maintain the modern image of the cleanliness of the French 'new man', the barbarity of the Algerian, his supposed need for being clean and civilised, was accentuated. This construction of difference was most intensified in the institutionalisation of torture by the French military: in the

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social inequality and working conditions. Giroud, 331-338 passim (questions 3 and 24 in results appendix).

<sup>555</sup> Monnet's September 1946 report to the *Conseil Général du Plan*, quoted in Kuisel, *Capitalism*, 225.

<sup>556</sup> On Poujade and other, more intellectual reactions to French *rattrapage*, such as the emergence of academic sociological studies and critiques of technocracy, see: Kuisel, *Capitalism*, 270-271.

torture chamber, Sartre explained, only one side could be human; torture maintained French difference by dehumanising the Algerian.<sup>557</sup>

Fear for the loss of difference also informed other identity determinants, as modernisation created an unknown quantity, the ‘new man’. Talk of newness – which more often than not was pejorative, chiding newfangled notions like *nouvelle critique* – was bewildering because it concerned mainly normative prescriptions for how the ‘new man’ should be recognised, that is, his image rather than his definition. The ‘new man’ had inherited his *métier* and was expected to transform it into a technological profession, a career, within one generation; but becoming a *jeune cadre*, formed from the old strata of bourgeois and engineer, meant losing these traditional identity factors, and adapting to the intermediate position of up-and-comer; ‘new man’ was led to position himself by status symbols and consumption.<sup>558</sup> These were young people whom Perruchot saw dreaming of their prospective furniture at the age of twenty, and who recorded with Giroud vacations, cars, diversions and home appliances as the things they lacked the most.<sup>559</sup> The more the ‘new man’ changed, the more the ‘new woman’ remained the same as the old woman of yore: A-line dresses and new domestic appliances did not particularly liberate her; care of the home was still her responsibility, and she only got the vote after the war; and she had her own ‘feminine’ pattern of consumption (fashion, cosmetics, women’s magazines) that distinguished her and her status. ‘New men’ and ‘new women’, particularly as young couples, faced the catch of ‘dependent participation’: becoming flexible worker-consumers meant they were culturally afloat, but refusing the ‘national middle class’ excluded them from the kind of nation France was in the process of becoming. This state-produced anxiety (and state-produced compensation) separated spheres of life from one another, restricting intimate security and

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<sup>557</sup> Ross, *Fast Cars*, 114-116; see also, “Une Victoire,” Sartre’s introduction to Henri Alleg, *La Question* (Paris: Collection Documents, 1958); Jean-Paul Sartre, “A Victory,” *Colonialism and Neocolonialism*, trans. by Azzedine Haddour, Steve Brewer and Terry McWilliams (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 65-77.

<sup>558</sup> Ross, *Fast Cars*, 167-171.

<sup>559</sup> Perruchot, 172; Giroud, 331-338 *passim* (question 8 in results appendix).

identity to the home and thus contributing to a retreat from the public to the private.<sup>560</sup>

The French fear of Americanisation, which came invariably as part of the influx of American aid, methods and commodities, was also informed in part by nationalist fears for the Frenchness of French life. It was encapsulated in the double negation of the Poujadist slogan 'Neither Ford nor Lenin': neither rampant liberal capitalism nor Soviet-style collectivism, which during the Fourth Republic was the constant leftist 'menace' to the old bourgeoisie. The Fourth Republic also saw a principled anti-Americanism from the left, rejecting free market expansionism and the ideological indoctrination it threatened to bring. Under de Gaulle, when the perceived threat from the left was no more, anti-American sentiment revived, although, as Kuisel argues, it was altogether weaker for accompanying the General's assertions of France's independence and *grandeur*. In the 1960s the French left chose to struggle against 'American imperialism' in the Third World and to attack de Gaulle and the State as agents of Americanism, instead of America directly.<sup>561</sup> Ultimately, as with every major fear, the French were also fascinated by Americanism, and their popular culture reflected that clearly and consistently; as Kuisel puts it, "The American model was a kind of mirror in which the French viewed themselves or, perhaps, before which they preened."<sup>562</sup> The sign and, to a degree, the cause of this fascination was precisely the French wariness of the dissolution of French-American differences: in the long run, as the two socioeconomic systems grew closer to each other, the United States became increasingly banal in the French imaginary. It was becoming clear that the two countries were not categorically or ideologically different, but rather simply two economic systems of organization, roughly within the same ideational framework. America had never been the absolute other; rather, it had been the painfully similar, reflecting French

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<sup>560</sup> Ross, *Fast Cars*, 106-107, 147-149.

<sup>561</sup> Richard F. Kuisel, *Seducing the French: The Dilemma of Americanization* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 132 – henceforth: Kuisel, *Seducing*; Kedward claims that under de Gaulle complaints about consumerism came in fact mostly from sources on the left, rather than from traditional conservatives; Kedward, 409.

<sup>562</sup> Kuisel, *Seducing*, 235.

shortcomings during a period of tender self-confidence for an otherwise fiercely proud nation.<sup>563</sup>

The kernel of the American temptation and of the perceived danger it represented was consumerism, which was taken to threaten the French *civilisation* with a dumbing down through mass culture that was spoken of in terms of the old jeremiad of 'bread and circuses'.<sup>564</sup> Rationing ended in 1949, and the return to free consumption and supply abundance was cause enough for popular magazines like *Paris-Match* to declare it the year of the return of *joie de vivre*.<sup>565</sup> A decade later, the French government could claim its society was a consumer society based on consent. But that consent to consume was initially born out of the necessities of the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, a time of great shortages and great poverty. Initially, then, the market was there to be exploited, and indeed, French advertisers in the first postwar decade took it for granted that deprivation and discontent on their own could create an impetus for consumerism.<sup>566</sup> Nevertheless, in the eyes of its critics American-inspired consumerism was thought to be contaminating culture itself, the Latin humanism the French regarded as their *civilisation*. From the cultural wasteland of consumerism and conformity in the New World nothing positive could proceed, only an infantile, technical mass culture whose levelling powers would transform *civilisation* into an exchange market of commodities.<sup>567</sup> In fact, this was already in place: modern popular culture *was* a mass culture in which, as with other sectors of the economy, participation was through consumption.

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<sup>563</sup> Kuisel, *Seducing*, 234; Ross, *Fast Cars*, 42.

<sup>564</sup> Kuisel, *Seducing*, 110; compare with Morin, 16.

<sup>565</sup> Kedward, 372. Nevertheless, amid growing affluence and growing appetites for consumption, much work was still needed to alleviate the plight of the French poor and homeless. 1949 was also the year in which Abbé Pierre (then just Henri Grouès) founded his organisation, *Les Compagnons d'Emmaüs*, several years before becoming the iconic figure that caught Barthes's eye.

<sup>566</sup> Kedward, 375, 404. Kuisel, *Seducing*, 103-104. To some extent this explains the 'paperback revolution' that only arrived in France after the war. Even before the reading public grew through the baby boom and educational reforms, sheer consumerism had made paperbacks an instant success – they were cheaper so people could afford to buy more of them. Lough, 372, 384.

<sup>567</sup> Kuisel, *Seducing*, 117, 119, 121.



A curious case of French cultural Americanisation through mass culture unfolded throughout the 1950s in the genre of science fiction, which only became successful in France after the Second World War, as popular attention to it spread from the popular press (*Le Figaro*, *France-Dimanche*), through the journals (*Mercure*, *Les Temps modernes*), to the major publishers (Hachette-Gallimard, Denoël), resulting in dedicated paperback series. Initially deemed ‘foreign’ and ‘popular fiction’, undeserving of ‘serious’ attention, American science fiction helped rehabilitate French futuristic writing (notably Jules Verne) as worthy fiction, but for some time longer remained the dominant form in the genre, indicating the French preference for the American quality in and of science fiction.<sup>568</sup> However, most 1950s French translations attempted to exoticise and emphasise the ‘American-ness’ of American science fiction for its French readership, showing how the French literary pro-Americanism reacted to the French *image* of America. This suggests that, if only implicitly, the French recognised their psycho-social future as lying with their own Americanisation: American society was the horizon of French society.<sup>569</sup>

Yet science fiction was also the locus of the subversion of American imperialism. In the United States, an ascendant petty bourgeoisie employed in technological professions was linked with the science fiction they consumed, a genre that conferred fictional power on those who embrace change and ‘march with the times’. In France, too, this romanticised, ‘juvenile’ image was a literary call for social change, attracting both bourgeois culture and a young counter-culture. Yet differing reactions to it suggested an emergent rift between the old French bourgeoisie’s technophobia and fear for established hierarchies, and younger generations who embraced technology as the key to social mobility and

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<sup>568</sup> Gérard Klein, “La Science Fiction,” in *Les Années 50*, ed. by Jacques Demarcq (Paris: Editions du Centre Pompidou, 1988), 436-437; Jean-Marc Gouanvic, *Sociologie de la traduction: La science-fiction américaine dans l’espace culturel français des années 1950* (Artois: Artois Presses Université, 1999), 21-22, 89, 95, 99, 21-22; regarding Vian’s role as a major conduit of science fiction into France see: Gilbert Pestureau, *Boris Vian, les amerlauds et les godons* (Paris: Union Générale d’Editions / 10/18, 1978), 281-306.

<sup>569</sup> In economics as in science fiction, American models were adapted rather than emulated. Monnet’s modernisation instructors altered instructions they had received in the United States, reducing them to their narrow technical side. Kuisel, *Seducing*, 81-84.

to improvement of standards of living.<sup>570</sup> Perruchot, too, saw a link between the easy approach of young people to modernisation, their confidence in themselves and therefore in the future, and their disdain for their unenthusiastic and self-satisfied elders at the helm of the country.<sup>571</sup> In both technology and its literary representation, the nexus of Americanisation and modernisation had a particular appeal to French youths.

One of the anti-colonial essays of the period demonstrates just how the cultural elements informing youth experience and French experience in general – colonialism, ‘Americanisation’ through modernisation, and consumerism – were perceived as mutually constitutive elements that were cause for cultural pessimism. Aimé Césaire concluded his essay *Discours sur le colonialisme* (1950, reissued 1955) by invoking the familiar comparison – this time of the Fourth Republic – with imperial Rome. He cited Quinet’s observation that Rome’s destruction came not at the hands of barbarian invasions, but from the eruption of barbarism within it, born of the Romanising of conquered surrounding nations. For contemporary France (and other European empires), this internal barbarism was latent racism and a colonialism which suffocated the cultural identities of colonised peoples. But the kernel of Western barbarism was, to Césaire, American-style capitalism, which sustained the colonial system: “L’heure est arrivée du Barbare. Du Barbare moderne. L’heure américaine. Violence, démesure, gaspillage, mercantilisme, bluff, grégarisme, la bêtise, la vulgarité, le désordre.”<sup>572</sup> The immoderate, vulgar and deceptive American age of barbarism was already upon the French; yet, as Césaire pointed out, they continued to see their problems in the colonised – Algerians as well as young people – rather than in the culture that effectively colonised them. Americanisation and decolonisation, as two faces of French modernisation, thus affected not only the circumstances and experiences of youths, but also influenced the profoundly ambivalent way they were perceived by their elders: as

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<sup>570</sup> Gouanvic, 142-143. Curiously, Morin does not mention science fiction in *L’Esprit du temps*, although he discusses at length many aspects informing it – youth, Americanism, mass culture, literature, tastes and worldviews.

<sup>571</sup> Perruchot, 18, 20, 23-25, 31.

<sup>572</sup> Aimé Césaire, *Discours sur le colonialisme* (Dakar : Présence Africaine, 1955), 57.

conduits of a future that was not entirely desirable, agents not so much of France's transition as of its transformation.

### **A Waking Dream: Boris Vian and *L'Ecume des jours***

There is an inherent difficulty in approaching Boris Vian (1920-1959) and his works as they are both the subjects of a cult. Vian's short and productive life inspired the romantic mystique of a great promise never fully delivered on as an author and critic, a jazz musician and singer, a satirist and a 'pataphysician'. His background, however, did not set him up for creative prominence: born to a well-off family in the Paris suburb of Ville-d'Avray, he initially trained and worked as an engineer. During the occupation Vian became active in the Paris underground jazz scene and with the *Zazous*. Among them he met and married his first wife, Michelle, and had two children by her. During the *épuration* Vian's father Paul was murdered and this, together with his bourgeois status, gave rise to unsubstantiated suspicions that he had been a collaborator. These suspicions also attached to Boris and preceded him, for example, when he first met the initially disapproving (but later charmed) Simone de Beauvoir. Vian became a central figure in the formerly clandestine jazz scene of liberated Paris as performer (mainly on trumpet at the *Club Tabou*), wit and jazz connoisseur. This involvement earned him the title 'prince of Saint-Germain-des-Prés', with which he remained associated. It was shortly after the liberation that Vian also began to write 'serious' fiction (rather than occasional diversions for friends), typically working on several pieces simultaneously. His first postwar creative surge yielded two novels: *J'Irai cracher sur vos tombes* and *L'Ecume des jours*, the latter considered his finest work.<sup>573</sup>

*J'Irai cracher* was labelled 'immoral', becoming the first high-profile literary obscenity trial since Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and Baudelaire's *Les*

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<sup>573</sup> Boris Vian, *L'Ecume des jours* (Paris: Union Général d'Editions – 10/18, 1963 [1947]); Vernon Sullivan, *J'Irai cracher sur vos tombes*, trans. by Boris Vian (Paris: Editions du Scorpion, 1946). *J'Irai cracher*, a thriller written in a fortnight as a bet, was published under the pseudonym 'Vernon Sullivan', which Vian used for three subsequent *noir* novels. All further references to *L'Ecume des jours* will note page numbers (or chapter numbers in roman numerals) in parentheses in the main text, and refer to the edition cited.

*Fleurs du mal* a hundred years earlier. Its unrepeated *succès de scandale* gained Vian much public attention, but one which focused on a narrow aspect of his writing. In general, most of Vian's writing remained until his death greatly underrated: his experimentation was mainly appreciated by likeminded writers such as Robbe-Grillet (who got Vian's *L'Automne à Pékin* published by Minuit) and his friend Raymond Queneau. It was only in the early 1960s, several years after his death, that his work returned into public attention: *L'Ecume des jours* was republished in paperback as part of the successful 10/18 series, and his pacifist song *Le Déserteur*, written near the end of the Indochina war, was rediscovered by a new generation of anti-war protestors in the late Algerian war and the start of the Vietnam war. The fresh and imaginative *L'Ecume des jours* was later adopted by student activists in May 1968 as a manifesto of sorts.<sup>574</sup> A wave of academic studies into Vian's work and life followed, peaking with a 1977 conference at the Cerisy cultural centre, the two-volume proceedings of which are an indispensable source to any Vian study.

*L'Ecume des jours* is a short but complex novel, pregnant with intertextual *clins-d'oeil* and symbolism, and its plot is not easy to summarise satisfactorily. Essentially, the story is about a young man falling in love with a young woman, but their happiness is short-lived, as the young woman then falls ill and dies. This is a very partial account of *L'Ecume des jours*, although it does tell some of the story of protagonists Colin and Chloé, and the period between their wedding (in chapters XVII-XXII, immediately after meeting and falling in love) and Chloé's death and funeral (chapters LXV-LXVI) is the main axis of plot progression.<sup>575</sup> It is a plot in which things start out as positive and hopeful and end up somewhat depleted and darkened by circumstances.<sup>576</sup> The novel is generally read as telling the story of the disillusionment attendant upon growing up. Most of the characters are young people – Chloé, Colin, his friend Chick, Chick's girlfriend Alise, Alise's uncle and Colin's cook Nicolas (who at 29 is the oldest of the main characters), and his girlfriend Isis – and their world is narrated

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<sup>574</sup> Meakin, 4-5; for an extensive account of this largely posthumous success, see: Michel Fauré, *Les Vies posthumes de Boris Vian* (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions – 10/18, 1975).

<sup>575</sup> Meakin, 39.

<sup>576</sup> J.K.L. Scott, *From Dreams to Despair: An Integrated Reading of the Novels of Boris Vian* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1998), 80, 278.

through their externalised subjective experiences: falling in love, for example, is described as being enveloped in a warm, fragrant, pink cloud (40). But growing up turns the world sour for these young people as they come out of their respective, self-involved, infantile cocoons to engage with the world and find that it is a hard place.

Colin is the main agent for Vian's exploration of the ideas of transformation (of self and of world) and transience (of love, youth and happiness).<sup>577</sup> Colin's foil is his friend Chick, who is on his own quest. Chick is a fan of the celebrated philosopher Jean-Sol Partre, the great prophet of *engagement*, and obsessively collects Partriana. Alise is figured as Chick's *opposant*, as she tries to divert him from his quest for Partre. No less important than Colin is his lover and wife, Chloé. If Alise is like the little mermaid, Chloé is akin to Shakespeare's Ophelia, the lover neglected in life and exalted in death; for after their wedding Colin's desire for her declines and in a way her illness could be read as the alibi for this.<sup>578</sup> From the outset Chloé is characterised as a quasi-spectral character: named after a Duke Ellington piece, she is the product of the double projection of Colin's subconscious (his desire to be in love) and of jazz music. She is not quite a full person: in a transference repeated throughout the novel, as she becomes ill, she becomes her illness, and is indistinguishable from the *néuphar*, the malign waterlily growing in her lung. Chloé is a *dream* woman, an ideal figure whose reality supervenes entirely on Colin's cognition.<sup>579</sup>

The last in the main group of characters in *L'Ecume des jours* is Nicolas, Colin's chef, who in many ways is Colin's *adjuvant* in his romantic quest.<sup>580</sup> As well as being Colin's employee, he also plays the role of friend and mentor to him. Older and more experienced than his employer, Nicolas seems an ideal

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<sup>577</sup> Alistair Charles Rolls, *The Flight of the Angels: Intertextuality in Four Novels by Boris Vian* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1999), 100; Scott, 94-97; both refer to Michel Maillard, "Colin et Chick ou l'Impossible quête, lecture sémio-critique," in *Lecture plurielle de L'Ecume des jours*, dir. by Alain Costes (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions / 10/18, 1979), 197-236 – volume henceforth abbreviated as *Lecture*.

<sup>578</sup> Maillard, 263-266; Meakin, 52, 58.

<sup>579</sup> Rolls, 54, 89; Scott, 98.

<sup>580</sup> The terms of *opposant* (regarding Alise) and *adjuvant* allude to the Structuralist narratological work of Vladimir Propp, Algirdas-Jacques Greimas and Tzvetan Todorov on the literary motif of the quest. In Vian scholarship all subsequent studies refer back to Maillard.

ersatz father to Colin: he ‘knows about girls’ and offers advice without the attendant assertion of authority, and even initiates him into the ways of the *biglemoi* erotic dance (24-26).<sup>581</sup> Ever resourceful, his character is reminiscent of Wodehouse’s butler Jeeves, or of the archetypal figure of the magical Master. In fact, as the master and mentor to Colin, he plays a similar role to that of Chick’s object, Partre. Although Nicolas remains alive at the end of the novel – most of the other characters meet their death one way or another – he too suffers the ravages of time.

The rapid aging of Nicolas (seven years in a week) intensifies the gradual degradation, from chapter XXXIII onwards, of Colin’s household as a whole. This becomes most apparent when Alise comes to visit the ill Chloé and notices, apart from her uncle’s change, that there is less light in the flat than before (109), leading her to wonder what is going on (110), before Chloé turns her attention to the dying of the lamps and the retraction of the walls and window (111). Even Nicolas’ oven is softening and turning into a pot (127). Watching it, the formerly robust Nicolas (Colin had thought he was built like Johnny Weissmuller; 37) has noticeably aged. Colin, who already treats him as one of his possessions (he had acquired him from an aunt for his old chef and a kilo of Belgian coffee; 11), now wants to let him go as his worth has diminished (128). This personal deterioration is metonymic of a general, creeping degradation that seems to accelerate as the narrative progresses, unravelling the novel’s artificial, decadent utopia in the face of nature.

With its torturing desires, sad loves and unhappy endings, *L’Ecume des jours* can be read as a failed quest, like those of Orpheus or Tristan, in which love is both desirable and impossible. This desire for the other enslaves the human spirit and leads to unhappiness: but Costes adds that all desires name their fulfilment, the object which, once attained, will extinguish them. Therefore, all

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<sup>581</sup> The *biglemoi*, as a sensual Black American dance, is part of the Vianesque leitmotiv of fascination with Black American culture: *L’Ecume des jours* was reportedly completed in New Orleans, Memphis and Davenport, three major hubs of American jazz; and the heteronym ‘Vernon Sullivan’ gestured toward Black American creativity and identity. Whereas Vian’s portrayal of women is at times clearly derisory, even misogynistic, his more complex relationship with Black American culture cannot be reduced to primitivist or exoticist fascinations, however clear their imprint.

desires are doomed, and, in our case, all romantic passions disappear once sated.<sup>582</sup> The impossible desires in the novel maintain its narrative tension, putting characters through necessary and senseless but aestheticised misery. Vian was defined as an Absurdist (albeit on the strength of his theatre), and the novel has been read as depicting a Camusian struggle against the absurdities of life so as to give it some sense.<sup>583</sup> Such readings imply that the role of fiction is merely to *lend* form to things, a fleeting, temporary coherence doomed by the very nature of the world to disintegrate and decline like its constitutive elements.<sup>584</sup>

Vian presents his young people as interchangeable. They occupy a closed world that seems to belong to the world of fairytale rather than social realism.<sup>585</sup> This world is shaped by the subjective desires of its young characters: inner and outer worlds intermix and the external world metaphorically reflects their emotions. Square rooms turn round to the sound of a romantic record to ‘cuddle’ the lovers in their bed (88), the anticipation of Colin’s marriage hastens its occurrence (47) – space and time become malleable in the service of the human self and its will. This is an unencumbered world of possibility, in which everything seems to happen as if by itself. On the whole, the abstract value of things takes precedence over the materiality of things and their actual use.<sup>586</sup>

David Walker points out a thematic link between the postwar literature documenting France’s new consumerism and a trend in late-nineteenth century fiction which he calls the ‘literature of consumption.’ The era of consumption has given rise to two kinds of (at least literary) entities: the consumer is a character defined by desiring and consuming new objects; the consumer object is a seemingly timeless commodity standing for fetishised newness that is inescapably squandered upon consumption. The discourse of consumerism is

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<sup>582</sup> Alain Costes, “Le Désir de Colin,” in *Boris Vian: Colloque de Cerisy*, dir. by Noël Arnaud and Henri Baudin, vol. I, 170 – henceforth this volume will appear as *Colloque*.

<sup>583</sup> Esslin, 275, 361; Scott, 266-267; Doris-Louise Hainault, “Amour et/ou mort dans *L’Ecume des jours*,” in *Colloque*, 161.

<sup>584</sup> Meakin, 70.

<sup>585</sup> Scott, 83; Meakin, 33, 43.

<sup>586</sup> Claudette Oriol-Boyer, “L’écho-nomie dans *L’Ecume des jours*, lecture socio-critique,” in *Lecture*, 328.

metonymic: consumers *buy into* totality by purchasing a part of it.<sup>587</sup> Even before our age of disposability, the ‘literature of consumption’ presented the consumer object as one not meant to improve with age but to wear out, threatening the consumer by its degradation. Walker’s examples were Perec’s *Les Choses* (1965) and Beauvoir’s *Les belles Images* (1966), but this holds just as well for Vian’s Colin and Chick nearly twenty years earlier. Consumption in the novel is comforting: *having* more is equated with *being* more, and the loss of property (as with Colin and Chick) corresponds to a loss of selfhood. Ownership is perceived as a close relation: Colin’s romantic notion is of a ‘sacred’ relationship of ‘having’ a lover who ‘belongs’ to him – a role played for Chick not by Alise (55-56, 96, 147) but by his Partriana collection (LIV).<sup>588</sup>

Barthes’s comments on cleanliness and newness as timelessness (see above in this chapter, in Ross’s discussion of new cars) further illuminate this consumer mentality and link the rejection of the old with the rejection of work as two forms of degradation. Chapter XXV presents Colin’s taste for excess and his objection to work, which is tied up with his disdain for things that wear out or get used up (67-69, 82). We are introduced to Colin and into the narrative through the long, detailed sequence of his *toilette* (7-9). Colin, a precious dandy, describes the two things he does in life as learning and loving (131), and thinks work lowers man to the level of machine (124).<sup>589</sup> This impression is supported by the description of Chick’s factory workplace (chapter XLVIII) and Colin’s work in the arms factory (chapters LI-LII). The necessity of taking up work saps the youth, indeed the life force, out of him: he is racked by fatigue and loses his fond outlook on people (165), and is crushed by the task of announcing Chloé’s impending death (166).

One of the defining features of youthfulness in the characters is their self-absorption, to the point of narcissism. Colin’s is a completely self-absorbed life, revolving entirely around him – his home, environment, leisure, chef and friends.

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<sup>587</sup> This discourse is epitomised in the name of Zola’s fictional store, *Au Bonheur des dames* (1873). David Walker, “Shopping and Fervour: Modern Literature and the Consumer Society,” *French Studies* LVIII, 1 (January 2004), 34-35, 38.

<sup>588</sup> Oriol-Boyer, 297; Rolls, 78.

<sup>589</sup> Compare this with Arthur Seaton’s more pragmatic attitude in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, acknowledging that at least machine work gives him time to think.



Desiring to fall in love, he promptly does, but in a strictly youthful milieu of children-of-nobody who all look alike. There is a hint of suspicion that his infatuation might be either wholly with himself (narcissistic) or with his next-of-kin (incestuous).<sup>590</sup> On the whole, the fundamental narcissism of the lovers, which has them smitten above all with themselves and with falling in love, can also be the source of a desire for obstacles, a desire for both the projection and deferral (or frustration) of love, in line with the Orpheus/Tristan template that renders love both desirable and impossible.<sup>591</sup> A candid remark on this paradoxical formulation appears in chapter LIV, when Chick remains alone with his Partriana: Alise would have waited for him, but he would not accept it that she stay simply out of love (150). Colin does stay with Chloé out of devotion, but it seems to be precisely that quality that makes him fall out of love with her (chapter XXXVII). Mutual love is not enough; ‘real’ intimate relations are elsewhere.

In *L’Ecume des jours* youth is clearly figured as a fool’s paradise: its initial happiness and optimism fade and the ideal and potential are replaced by the sobering real. The young characters only feel themselves free because they do not know the true costs that life demands; as they learn, their ‘armour of dreams’ is stripped away by disillusionment. Their youthfulness is crushed on encounter with the adult world.<sup>592</sup> The narrative of *L’Ecume des jours* takes place in an open-ended present, devoid of background or afterthought, and it is this context that saves the young characters from the feeling of belatedness.<sup>593</sup> Still, the novel as a whole can thus be seen as an elegy for lost youth, and a complaint against time and mortality. The fall into time is a tragic one, and time itself as it passes comes to be increasingly identified with unhappiness.

The novel’s fantastic mode and anti-utopian outlook shift from dreams and projects to dissolution and death. The passing of youth in attrition and misery becomes one manifestation of what Meakin called ‘anti-alchemy’ in *L’Ecume*

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<sup>590</sup> André Jarry, “L’Ecume des mots: Un Janus Uni-Frons,” in *Colloque*, 157; Meakin 35.

<sup>591</sup> Meakin, 53-54.

<sup>592</sup> Scott, 80, 84-88, 126, 266.

<sup>593</sup> Jeanne-Marie Baude, “L’Espace vital. L’Imaginaire dans les structures du texte,” in *Lecture*, 88-90.

*des jours*.<sup>594</sup> Love itself is presented as immanent rather than transcendent, and as such it, too, is subjected to the rule of time and mortality; there is no 'endless love' beyond life, beyond this world, and even in life it has its limitations. And as most of the characters die, almost all of them violently, love is lost in the world and death asserts itself as the supreme reality of *L'Ecume des jours*; love lost, violence, sickness, death as 'supreme reality' - all signs of the universe in its entirety running down.<sup>595</sup>

This vision of degradation ties back with the novel's contemporary outlook on modernisation and consumerism. *L'Ecume des jours* starts out by presenting an affirmative view of technology, not least in the domestic sphere; and Vian seems to think that technology can do more to improve human life than, for example, the Sartrean politics of *engagement*, which is satirised throughout the novel. Yet as the novel darkens, the satire moves on to more sinister targets – religion, the alienation of work, militarism – and the portrayal of technology takes a turn for the negative, at times almost resembling a Naturalistic narrative.

From the famous pianocktail (12-14), through mechanical rocking chairs (32-33), to frogs with propulsion nozzles (95) and cyborg rabbits employed as pill extruders (96), the novel celebrates mechanical intervention in nature for human comfort. This fascination with modern technology is complemented by a horror of nature and the natural, of organic matter that kills – like Chloé's own *fleur du mal*, the *nénuphar* – or dies, like the body parts strewn outside Dr. Mangemanche's clinic (103-104). This is a story of the Fall, a fall into time, in which Colin's living space becomes a dying space.<sup>596</sup> Yet this Fall is not from a harmonious, natural garden of Eden, but from an artificial, engineered paradise; its opposite, the temporal, natural world, is therefore portrayed as inhuman (and anti-human), disintegrating and threatening, with hostile Nature irresistibly invading and disintegrating the mechanical world (140, 146). The plot that leads us from (Colin's) bathroom to swamp (Chloé's resting place) can be read as a

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<sup>594</sup> Meakin, 12, 71.

<sup>595</sup> Oriol-Boyer, 392; Rolls, 93; Scott, 91, 265.

<sup>596</sup> Baude, 72.

decline from culture to nature, undoing man's artifice and returning to a primal chaos that finally reclaims the products of human endeavour (172).<sup>597</sup>

For all its fantastical elements, *L'Écume des jours* is a novel of the everyday, approaching the familiar as strange and new, without attached significance that might endow it with what Robbe-Grillet later called a 'myth of depth'. The reader is instantly struck with the novel's liveliness; nothing stands still, and the whole fictional world is animated under the reader's gaze: animals are humanised, even inanimate objects are given organic life.<sup>598</sup> Vian has the reader see the fictional world through Colin's eyes, the gaze of a child ordering his world around himself. Then again, this is all but declared in his foreword: "...the brief demonstration that follows gathers all its energy from the fact that the story is *entirely true*, because I *imagined* it from one end to the other. Strictly speaking, its material realization consists essentially of a *projection of reality*... onto an irregularly undulating reference plane, resulting in some *distortion*."<sup>599</sup>

Vian's great literary triumph in *L'Écume des jours* was in being ahead of his time, already anticipating the need to reinvent fictional representation and linguistic signification *beyond* the *chosiste* gaze of the *nouveau roman*.<sup>600</sup> The narrative's derealisation actually intensifies its affective impact, most noticeably in the disruption of Colin's circumscribed, sheltered space – an externalised disintegration reflecting the novel's interest in the transformation of objects, not of feelings – after all, "people do not change, things do" (149). Merleau-Ponty's suggestion that sanity hinges not on personal critical sense but on the structure and constancy of one's personal space, is reflected from the plot's tipping point (XXXIII) onwards, in the deterioration of Colin's household, his disorientation (137-138), the home's dissolution (LXVII) and Colin's final detachment during

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<sup>597</sup> Meakin, 61-62, 68-69; Costes in discussion, *Colloque*, 115.

<sup>598</sup> Meakin, 14-15.

<sup>599</sup> Boris Vian, *Foam of the Daze*, trans. and intro. by Brian Harper, annotated by Gilbert Pestureau and Michel Rybalka (Los Angeles: Tam Tam Books, 2003), 3 (my italics). This English translation of Pestureau and Rybalka's 1994 French critical edition comes closest to an English critical edition. See also Rybalka, "L'Écume des jours Amour-Fiction," *Colloque*, 211-212.

<sup>600</sup> Marie Redonnet, quoted in Rolls, 84; Marguerite Nicod-Saraiva, "L'Univers de L'Écume des jours. Vers une lecture poétique," *Lecture*, 55, 61-62 ; Meakin, 45, 48.

Chloé's funeral (170).<sup>601</sup> As Chick notices, some time before the confused Colin, the world seems to close in around them (116). The way the world is experienced is also tried through Vian's linguistic usage, or what Jacques Bens called, in his postface to the first paperback edition, Vian's '*langage-univers*'.<sup>602</sup> This is immediately apparent, especially to the non-native French reader: not only do phrases and thoughts literally come alive, but the words themselves are transformed by inverted syllables, words with changed endings, several words condensed into one, colloquialisms, Anglicisms, onomatopoeias – playful language conveying the narrator's distrust of the whole naming, classifying and signifying system that is language. Vian distrusts language enough to privilege sense experience, particularly vision and the visual, over it as preceding it in evolution and importance.<sup>603</sup>

Nowadays, following much biographical and literary research, it is easier to trace the world of Colin and Alise in *L'Ecume des jours* to the particular juncture of Paris in 1946. Severe shortages are in the background of the novel's anticipation of more plentiful times and of France's later consumer society. Elaborate, sometimes outlandish, clothes, objects and spaces are described extensively and vividly, celebrated in the style of Huysmans's Decadent masterpiece *A Rebours* (1882). Sometimes this exhilarating effect of consumption is addressed explicitly, as when the narrator notes that large buildings were cheered up by shops (30). Rolls highlights the detailed representation of nylon stockings in the novel, at a time when they were already available but not yet universally adopted. He sees the nylon stocking as a fetish object, standing for the true object of French desires – American normalcy. The interstitial period of the post-Liberation years reflected the double efforts of

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<sup>601</sup> Baude, 111-112, referring to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: NRF, 1945), 337. Other postwar Absurdist, like Ionesco and Genet, manipulated performance spaces and employed 'concrete metaphors' in their works. The discussion of MacInnes in the next chapter will show a similarly spatial representation of the disruption of life.

<sup>602</sup> Jacques Bens, "Un langage-univers," in Vian, 175-184.

<sup>603</sup> Meakin, 24-29, 47. Considering this narrative is a 'projection of reality', it should perhaps only be natural that it privilege the visual. Then again, all vision is a projection, taking what is inside (retinal images) for what is ('seen') outside.

recapturing the ‘*rythme d’avant-guerre*,’ and attempting the effortless, quotidian glamour attached to the American lifestyle.<sup>604</sup> Thus, in its symbolic order of fashion along with its modes of narration and textuality, *L’Ecume des jours* engages with everyday life in general - cooking, music, dancing, work, recreations, social encounters, falling in love, falling ill – and that of postwar Paris in particular.

A tone of growing anguish pervades the novel, also rooted in its context of production. Vian presents postwar youth as essentially decadent; but this is an updated decadence, no longer recoiling from industrialised, urbanised modernity and comfortable with technological artifice. Instead, it is the state of transition itself that causes their “moments of anguished aesthetic adolescence” – be it the transition into adulthood within the novel or the seemingly delayed modernisation of France *hors texte*.<sup>605</sup> The inverted values of the natural (here menacing) and the artificial (here sustaining an erstwhile Eden) is a typical but updated Decadent gesture: gold matures in lethal gases (163); rifle barrels grow in barren soil, a typical Decadent trope for the creative power of dead matter (143-144); and roses that grow in the barrels are both natural, being flowers, and artificial, being made of metal (144-146).<sup>606</sup> Other Decadent characteristics are the character of Colin, as a disaffected hedonist; the exaltation of pathos and the senses for both the characters and the narration; Colin’s amorality in his refusal to choose between good and bad, resulting in him marrying Chloé instead of Alise and living to regret it; Colin’s extreme individualism, and the exaltation of the personality and its world-conjuring quality; and the denial of culture and ethos typical of the enclosed juvenile world.

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<sup>604</sup> ‘*Retrouve le rythme d’avant-guerre...*’ was a contemporary advertising slogan for Hélios nylon stockings. Alistair Rolls, “In Olden Days a Glimpse of Stocking: Fashion, Fetishism and Modernity in Boris Vian’s *L’Ecume des jours*,” *French Cultural Studies* 15, 2 (June 2004), 99-113.

<sup>605</sup> Zurbrugg, 212. The formulation of *L’Ecume des jours* as an ‘updated’ Decadent novel relies on the characteristics noted above in the introduction to this thesis: Zurbrugg, 209-222; Poggioli, 84-88.

<sup>606</sup> Flowers in rifles are also an anti-war image evoking Vian’s anti-militarism (cf. his popular anthem ‘*Le Déserteur*’), as well as a sign of anti-aggression that was later revived in the Prague Spring.

The Decadent sensibility evident in *L'Écume des jours* is also tied with its increasing sense of belatedness, reflected in the entropic degradation of light, a metaphoric end of the day. As the novel begins, Colin's kitchen hallway enjoys two suns shining, simply for his love of sunlight (8). But night hems the lovers in as Chloé falls ill, forming concentric circles around them (87), encroaching on their lit realm, and soon the sun looks like an immense burning carcass (99) – reflecting either its already inanimate nature (like the barren earth in the armaments factory) or the impending dying of the light, as all funeral pyres extinguish when all organic matter burns out. Two chapters on, Chloé already notices the diminishing daylight (103), and Colin finally realises this, too, albeit in a poetic manner: the sun is leaving “*en profondeur*,” never to return (124).

Like Huysmans's *des Esseintes*, Colin lives in an enclosed world of artificial pleasures, linked to the natural world but trying to shut out its less pleasant aspects. But *des Esseintes* shows that the uncompromising disavowal of the organic elements in nature is ultimately not viable as it disavows one's own natural self. Risking his own death, *des Esseintes* eventually chooses life and the compromise of returning into society. Vian does not attempt to reconcile Colin with the real, adult world. Religion offers Colin no solace because its agents and establishment are risible, and even Jesus himself cannot give Colin's misery any consolation or meaning (168-169). After the funeral Colin is left at the water's edge, withdrawn, exhausted, desperate; the coda involving his grey mouse and a cat (172-174) could be taken as a sublimated suicide, an ultimate refusal of the world-by-its-own-rules. In that, Vian can be said to have stepped outside Decadent grooves, into a pessimistic and uncompromising expression.

## **Chapter 6: Britain – The Second Battle of the Bulge**

Like their French counterparts, British youths were perceived as a ‘national asset’ and the potential agents of their elders’ hopes for the future in the new welfare state.<sup>607</sup> They also represented a social problem and were often represented as menacing and regarded as threatening to change the country for the worse. In short, British youth was both counted on and feared.

Postwar British youths attracted much official attention, as attempts to recruit them to the reconstruction project led to a series of assessments of their situation and new measures for their productive development (in the military, in education and in industry). However, the popular image of youths as criminal presented a challenge to this official approach and rendered successive stylised types of teenagers – ‘Teds’, ‘mods’, ‘rockers’, ‘trads’ – as ‘folk devils’ who, in their reputed criminality, reflected the morally corrosive potential of postwar affluence.<sup>608</sup> Yet many of these conceptions of British youths were mythological: the new age of ‘classlessness in affluence’ never came, nor did the ‘teenage revolution’, and nor, for that matter, did teenage political influence (except in the restricted case of CND).

One representation that did match reality was that of postwar youths as affluent consumers. ‘Youth culture’, itself a simplifying term (there was more than one), was premised on discrete trends of consumption, particularly of fashion and cultural commodities and services. Indeed, a whole ‘youth industry’ sprang up in the wake of teen affluence, exploring and exploiting youths, first commercially, with public purveyors (mainly the BBC) following suit. As in France, youth culture was heavily influenced by American popular culture. In both countries American styles and fashions were filtered through national preoccupations to produce cultural products that reflected France and Britain as

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<sup>607</sup> On youth as ‘national asset’ see: John Davis, *Youth and the Condition of Britain: Images of Adolescent Conflict* (London: Athlone, 1990), 93 (henceforth: Davis, *Youth*).

<sup>608</sup> The term ‘folk devils’ was coined, with specific reference to British youth cultures, in: Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers*, rev. edn. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987 [1972]).

much as its American model. This situation of new opportunities and new frustrations was the focus of Colin MacInnes's novel, *Absolute Beginners*, a discussion of which will conclude this chapter.

## Youth in the Eyes of Its Elders

In the postwar period, consecutive British governments were expressly concerned with increasing opportunities for young people, resulting in a flush of official discussions, reports, provisions, and policy reforms. These must be understood with respect to two guiding themes of official British discourse: first, the very emergence of adolescence or youth as a distinct age group for consideration, not unprecedented but never before of a national scope; and second, the official understanding of the newly circumscribed *youth* phenomenon as a national asset. This meant that despite their relative lack of political influence young people had to be taken into special consideration as their future was linked with the future of the nation as a whole. This was not unprecedented in British political discourse, but after the Second World War youth grew in national importance and postwar educational provisions for them were qualitatively different from interwar policies.<sup>609</sup>

The Butler Education Act of 1944, discussed briefly in chapter 1, was the opening move in a series of government educational provisions, all well-meant but not without their practical difficulties; hampered by supply and teacher shortages, it was only fully implemented in the 1950s.<sup>610</sup> In 1947, school leaving age was raised to fifteen: this was controversial, as the longer children had to remain in school the longer they remained their parents' financial responsibility, but children's interests finally prevailed. In view of an overstretched and outdated empire, a compulsory National Service was introduced in 1948, taking in 200,000 new conscripts every year, excepting about 16% for their vocational training or higher education. By 1951 half the British military was made up of National Servicemen, but the quality of the annual intake reflected the still poor progress being made in the educational system.<sup>611</sup> This experience was formative

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<sup>609</sup> Davis, *Youth*, 104-106.

<sup>610</sup> Marwick, *Society*, 37.

<sup>611</sup> Hennessy, 79-82.



to all conscripts, giving most the opportunity to leave their birthplace and discover new regions at home and abroad, and offering some vocational training and possibly a military career. Certainly, since most conscripts were urbanites, their deployment across the country aided the dissemination of urban youth tastes and habits; moreover, it can be said to have helped foster a national synchronous cohesion, a generational consciousness.

Over its fifteen years of operation, National Service was a significant element in the experience of young British males. The 1950s and early 1960s saw it supplemented by other elements which became staples of young British lives, all brought about through processes of enquiry into the emergent youth experience. The Crowther Report of December 1959 redefined state secondary education as an education for *adolescents* that was therefore charged with containing their restless demand for more independence. As such it was credited with being the first – and rather late – conceptual and institutional point of separation of adolescents from children, and of their definition as a distinct age group.<sup>612</sup> More importantly, it indicated an official understanding, albeit partial, of adolescents' problems with an extended schooling system: teenagers were frustrated at being 'trapped' for longer, and looked elsewhere, to leisure, for the values, such as excitement and autonomy, that they felt were missing in their school experience. This has led some researchers to the contentious suggestion that teenage popular culture developed in no small part as a reaction to increased schooling.<sup>613</sup>

The Robbins Report of 1963, also mentioned in chapter 3, suggested an overhaul of the entire higher education and further education system so as to cater (somewhat belatedly) for the needs of the 'bulge'. The measures suggested included an expansion of the existing, 'old', universities and polytechnics; and the creation of 11 new universities across the country, partly by promoting some existing technical colleges to university status. Controversial for allegedly devaluing higher education, the measures following the Robbins Report nevertheless shaped many young lives through the modern education of 'new'

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<sup>612</sup> Davis, *Youth*, 95-98.

<sup>613</sup> Alan Sinfield, *Literature Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (London: Athlone, 1997), 157; Paul Rock and Stanley Cohen, "The Teddy Boy," in *The Age of Affluence 1951-1964*, ed. by Vernon Bogdanor and Robert Skidelsky (London: Macmillan, 1970), 316-318.

universities, polytechnics, and art schools. Higher education expansionism also expanded the condition of studenthood, effectively extending the adolescence of postwar 'affluent teenagers' with a period of time and opportunity but little material affluence. In complement, the 1963 Newsom Report sought to address the adolescent public that did not qualify for higher education. The rhetoric and reasoning of 'youth as national asset' guided the report in suggesting a radical revision of an outdated apprenticeship system: the nation's increasingly technological industry needed a specially trained junior workforce which had not been replenished to meet the rate of economic growth. As a matter of national emergency, vocational training had to be modernised and to be made attractive again to the young people hitherto exploited in apprenticeships.<sup>614</sup>

The mass media were quick to adopt the rhetoric of 'youth as national asset' and to disseminate the term 'teenager' into everyday vocabulary. The teenage celebration bandwagon made good copy – in particular, it seemed, to the *Daily Mirror* and the *Picture Post*, which ran regular spreads and serials on youth topics (such as the *Daily Mirror*'s influential 'The Beanstalk Generation' on 15-19 September 1958); but this also allowed the media to influence the meaning of 'teenager', shaping a descriptive reference into an ideological term, encumbered with the added moral concern of 'the nation's future'.<sup>615</sup> This opened the door to moral judgments and anxieties about what teenagers were, how they behaved and what they did – all in direct reference to the public good. The sometimes glib journalistic interventions in the public image of young people contributed to an elision of meanings: as teenagers throughout the 1950s were mostly working-class and the prominent culture was male, it was easy to consider teenage culture as a whole as deviant, violent and delinquent.<sup>616</sup> At times this resembled a throwback to the days of physiognomy, as young people's appearance (mainly the sartorial styles) was linked with rising crime and thus with general cultural decline when contemplating, for example, the figure of the Teddy Boy.<sup>617</sup>

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<sup>614</sup> Davis, *Youth*, 98-101, 107-109.

<sup>615</sup> On tabloid coverage see Marwick, *Sixties*, 61-63; Osgerby, "Young Ones," 15.

<sup>616</sup> Sandbrook, 441.

<sup>617</sup> Osgerby, "Young Ones," 18; Rock and Cohen, 315.

Partly in order to continue singing the praises of the otherwise ‘unsung majority’ of youth as the nation’s future – a reaction already familiar from Perruchot’s and Giroud’s surveys in France – the popular media of 1950s Britain attempted to marginalise criminality and relegate it to deviant behaviour, to juvenile delinquency. In a changing, insecure social climate this was relatively easy, as recorded crime figures did rise: 1951 saw more than twice as many recorded cases of violence against the person as there had been in 1938, and three times as many rapes; and between 1955-61 there was a threefold increase in under-21s convicted of violent crime.<sup>618</sup> Leslie Wilkins’s Home Office study *Delinquent Generations* (1960) suggested not only that postwar youths were more delinquent but that their delinquency spread as the postwar years wore on. The War alone was not enough to explain the supposed wave of youthful lawlessness; something else, perhaps anxiety regarding social and economic change, had to be considered.<sup>619</sup> In a later study, the sociologist T.R. Fyvel concurred, suggesting that social conditioning was to blame: juvenile delinquency was a delayed result of war (wartime destruction, absent fathers, overworked mothers) and more immediately the consequence of social and economic change, which led to the breakdown of traditional modes of socialisation.<sup>620</sup> Yet here again, Fyvel elided meanings and values. As Sandbrook points out, ‘youth’ was taken as ‘working-class youth’ and equated with a single type, the Teddy Boys, as well as with the general idea of juvenile delinquency.<sup>621</sup>

Looking back at a slightly later period of the same process of demonisation of juvenile delinquency, the sociologist Stanley Cohen portrayed the Teddy Boys, and the Mods after them, as victims of a moral panic made into ‘folk devils’. Society, Cohen claimed, reacted to enforce conformity on subcultures which it saw as rejecting its mainstream values; it did so through the established authority of the police and the judiciary, but also through the mass media. In reporting or commenting on juvenile delinquency, the media might have left behind a diffuse feeling of anxiety about the situation, or have thrown

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<sup>618</sup> Davis, *Youth*, 156; Sandbrook, 442.

<sup>619</sup> Leslie Wilkins, *Delinquent Generations* (London: HMSO, 1960); discussed in Davis 87-90.

<sup>620</sup> T.R. Fyvel, *The Insecure Offenders: Rebellious Youth in the Welfare State* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1961); discussed in Osgerby, “Young Ones,” 17.

<sup>621</sup> Davis, *Youth*, 154.

certain moral directives into the discourse, and so played on the normative concerns of the public, amplifying the cycle of transgression and reaction through biased representation, isolating and alienating deviants from society, thus leading to more deviance and more social control. This kind of journalistic connection of Teds to delinquency was paralleled in France, where the delinquency of young followers of *yéyé* was attributed to their 'Godless music'.<sup>622</sup> Cohen's catalogue of modes of expression is revealing, and encompasses news reports and commentary (proclaiming disaster, prophesying doom, or insinuating what *might* have happened) as well as uses of imagery (attributed spuriously or referring to 'affluent youths' to arouse the resentment of older generations). Since the social sciences offered no clear causal explanation, the media suggested some of their own: juvenile delinquency could have been 'a sign of the times'; a social 'disease'; a menacing, conspiratorial cabalism; or the result of sheer boredom – in which case further blame had to be delegated to society, for failing to constructively direct the young, or to a pathology of the young (because 'in the old days' one did not have time to get bored).<sup>623</sup>

Yet for the most part youth subcultures did not reject all mainstream values, and mainstream culture was not absolutely monolithic and repressive.<sup>624</sup> Perhaps the affluent society was to blame after all: just as the media manipulated public opinion so it manipulated popular tastes, and this commercial exploitation of the impressionable confused them about their tastes, values and standards: strange dress and linguistic habits, and a disturbingly casual attitude to violence. Therefore, the 'affluent youth' are troubled by affluence in general.<sup>625</sup> This take on the puzzle of 'delinquency in affluence' was elaborated in a pivotal document on postwar British youth culture, the Ministry of Education report on *The Youth Service in England and Wales*, chaired by Diana, Countess of Albemarle, and published shortly after the Crowther Report, in February 1960. The Albemarle Report went well beyond examining informal education to consider many aspects of contemporary youth experience that informed it, reflecting Lady Albemarle's view that understanding "the world of young people" illuminated the "less

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<sup>622</sup> Cohen, 17-18.

<sup>623</sup> Cohen, 51-64.

<sup>624</sup> Cf. Sandbrook, 452.

<sup>625</sup> This was suggested in 1959 by the sociologist Bryan Wilson, quoted in Sandbrook, 452.

tangible changes in society.” To do so the committee re-examined many clichés about the youth of the day – the delinquent generation, their rejection of family life, their supposed pampering by the Welfare State, their materialism, their immorality, their disaffectedness – and found all of them void. Considering various aspects of postwar life – the biological difference of ‘the bulge’, juvenile delinquency, National Service, housing shortages, the lack of educational opportunities, and consumerism – the committee (which included Richard Hoggart) concluded that British youths were not so bad after all. Young people needed to be empowered to realise their potential: their problems were “deeply rooted in the soil of a disturbed modern world,” and it was the state’s role to give them aims and challenges and to encourage them (through the Youth Service) to cooperate and participate.<sup>626</sup>

The Albemarle Report was probably the most substantially affirmative (and exceptionally clear) official document about youth in postwar Britain. The general public, however, tended to think of youth culture in simplistic and stereotypically abusive terms. ‘Teddy Boy’ became synonymous with ‘juvenile delinquent’, and later more generally with any disagreeable rogue (as in the case of John Osborne); and, for a while, ‘Teenager’ came to be just a generalised version of a Ted – and later of a Mod.<sup>627</sup> Among the various teenage types, the Teddy Boys were certainly the first visible ones and the first ‘folk devils’ tied up with the impression of Britain’s social change. The Teds – like their French counterparts, the *blousons noirs* – were a working-class product of the leaner postwar years and were in decline by the late 1950s, when some turned into Rockers. Overlapping with the Teds’ ubiquity in the newspapers were the Mods, a smarter set with more worldly and romantic pretensions, who better suited the affluence of the Macmillan years. More importantly, whereas the Teds could do no right by the average tabloid reader, the Mods had it both ways and were portrayed as folk devils in the magistrate’s court (most famously for early-1960s beach brawls), but as trendsetters of elegant, dandy style in the colour

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<sup>626</sup> Ministry of Education, *The Youth Service in England and Wales* (London: Parliamentary Papers, Cmnd. 929, 1960); Sandbrook, 448-450; Davis, 110-117; see also Ray Gosling, “Lady Albemarle’s Boys” (London: Fabian Society, 1961).

<sup>627</sup> Davis, *Youth*, 164-165, 189-190.

supplements.<sup>628</sup> At the same time as the Mods, the Trads (for traditional) emerged, associated with folk or blues music and Marxist or CND politics. As Mod style faltered in the later 1960s, the more middle-class Trad style gained ground thanks to a surge in student radicalism.

Lady Albemarle's misguided boys, indeed the majority of British youths, were not politically active, but this is not the representative image of the late 1950s. Politics was actually one of the areas of public life most influenced by the youth phenomenon. As their French counterparts protested in an organised and violent manner as part of the labour movement and against colonial wars, English youths rallied to the cause of nuclear disarmament.<sup>629</sup> The initial spark for the British nuclear disarmament movement was the government's international and security policies, and particularly the 1957 White Paper published by defence secretary Duncan Sandys. Sandys proposed to overhaul the overstretched British security commitments at home, across the empire and on the continent: to provide the best and most economical home defence, he suggested shrinking the military by abolishing National Service, relying instead on nuclear deterrence.<sup>630</sup> While in some circles this seemed a reasonable follow-up to the imperial flop at Suez several months earlier, others felt this was an incredible and outdated folly. Among the latter was J.B. Priestley, who cried foul in the *New Statesman*, calling for public protest against nuclear armament: quitting the arms race, he reasoned, would not only break the nuclear deadlock but also establish an alternative, moral leadership role for post-Suez Britain. The CND was a 'liberation movement' for the youth voice. Its arrival as a discernible group on the political stage effectively ended years of consensus politics.<sup>631</sup> Young people, under the age of 25, comprised at least half of the marchers and

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<sup>628</sup> Cf. Dick Hebdige, "The Meaning of Mod," *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*, ed. by Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (London: Unwin Hyman, 1976), 87-96.

<sup>629</sup> Unlike today, this did not concern environmentalism, curiously absent from the 1950s British public arena despite the growing conservationist trend suggested in chapter 3 above. Hennessy, 117.

<sup>630</sup> By this Sandys implied that Britain could not defend its population in case of an attack. William Wallace, "World Status without Tears," in Bogdanor and Skidelsky (eds.), 192-220.

<sup>631</sup> Robert Taylor, "The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament," in Bogdanor and Skidelsky (eds.), 251; see also the editors' introduction in Bogdanor and Skidelsky (eds.), 13.

demonstrators at any CND event. Yet while it did manage to focus popular leftist fears and frustrations between 1958 and 1962, CND enjoyed very limited success. Its methods tended to be anti-political, relying instead on emotional, gestural protests (like the Easter marches through the countryside), which, while charming young people disillusioned with party politics, did not mature into transformative politics. CND followed a tradition of radical dissenting movements, and was novel mainly in its function as pressure group and, most importantly, because of the predominance of young members.<sup>632</sup>

One of the stranger myths or aspirations tied up with British youth subcultures in the 1950s and early 1960s was the idea that the postwar 'gilded youth' constituted both an international movement and a distinct social class, and therefore would bring about the erosion of traditional class boundaries. This was not such a far-fetched idea, as by 1963 social polarisation and inequality had become less extreme; nevertheless, the world occupied by youth was "precisely a world of new-found affluence and conspicuous consumption, of apolitical quiescence, and of a new, *basically middle-class*, classlessness."<sup>633</sup> Popular literature and film, too, were still class-conscious, producing the 'disaffected middle-class youth' type of *Hurry on Down* and *Lucky Jim* or the 'working-class youth on the make' type of *Room at the Top* and *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*.<sup>634</sup> Although fears of a 'teenage revolution' animated defenders of a traditional way of life, British youths did not transform British politics in a major way. A 1965 study asserted that postwar British youths were actually rather conservative, politically continuous with their elders, and had no generational political identity.<sup>635</sup> This age group, uninterested in world events, economy or religion, was hard to recruit politically – much unlike their French counterparts, who were concerned with politics but felt unable to influence it. British youths of

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<sup>632</sup> The CND also tapped into the emerging Trad youth subculture, although the typical and unpopular Trad anti-Americanism did little to help its public profile. Marwick, *Sixties*, 65-66; Hennessy, 531; Taylor, "The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament," 221, 227, 250.

<sup>633</sup> Davis, *Youth*, 158-159 (my italics); see also: Peter Laurie, *The Teenage Revolution* (London: Anthony Blond, 1965), 9-11.

<sup>634</sup> Davis, *Youth*, 176-177; Sandbrook, 441.

<sup>635</sup> Philip Abrams and Alan Little, "The Young Activist in British Politics," *British Journal of Sociology* 16, 4 (December 1965), 325-331.

the 1950s and early 1960s were mainly concerned with leisure: Marxist observers thought this entangled them in their own oppression; viewed less dichotomously, the ‘oppression’ of affluence was simply a fundamental element merged into other social transformations – that is, leisure consumerism was part of young people’s ‘dependent participation’.<sup>636</sup> Ironically, the liberalisation of traditional British life, so linked to the threat presented by postwar youths, was eventually instigated from above by the Conservative Home Secretary, Rab Butler.<sup>637</sup> This fact was nevertheless obscured by a “gigantic ‘vitality fantasy’” of the time, animated by affluence to an “almost un-British vibrance” and tying together the almost ritual attack on stuffy conventions; the classlessness fallacy; aspirations to social ascendancy that effectively affirmed the class system; and the rise of youth – as subculture, leaders of the cult of vitality, speed and modernity.<sup>638</sup>

### Consuming Passions of a Flaming Youth

Young people in postwar Britain wielded greatest influence by using their affluence to consume in distinctive ways, leading contemporary commentators to refer to ‘teenage culture’ or ‘youth culture’.<sup>639</sup> The figure of ‘the Teenage Consumer’ was itself one of the powerful and ubiquitous images of British popular press. It was only to be expected that the ‘affluent youth’ would want to spend, but in the label ‘teenage consumer’ the two parts qualified each other: the teenager was defined by his consumption – just as in France – and the predominant consumer was the teenager. Promoting the term was one of the most influential youth studies in postwar Britain, Mark Abrams’s *The Teenage Consumer* (1959), on which he expanded in *Teenage Consumer Spending in 1959* (1961). Abrams was a commercial market researcher, not a disinterested social scientist (he relied on the primary research of other parties), but his

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<sup>636</sup> Laurie, 109-111; Sinfield, 178; Booker, 80.

<sup>637</sup> Among these measures are the relaxation of literary censorship, the legalisation of gambling, extending pub licensing hours, and preparing the abolishment of capital punishment and the decriminalisation of homosexuality. Hennessy, 512-513, 521.

<sup>638</sup> Booker, 22-24, 79; Marwick, 98-99.

<sup>639</sup> Marwick, *Sixties*, 43.



argument regarding teenage consumption trends was deemed influential enough for the Albemarle Committee to consult him.<sup>640</sup> Abrams concluded that there was “distinctive teenage spending for distinctive teenage needs in a distinctive teenage world.”<sup>641</sup> Earning more than ever, hardly taxed and unencumbered by adult commitments, British teenagers – whom Abrams defined as single youths between the ages of 15 (school leaving age) and 25 – had between them about £900 million to spend in 1958. This was double the amount their counterparts had had at their discretionary disposal twenty years earlier, and they spent it “mainly on dressing up in order to impress other teenagers and on goods which form the nexus of teenage gregariousness outside the home.”<sup>642</sup>

In *The Teenage Revolution* (1965), Peter Laurie elaborated on teenage spending patterns. Teenagers, claimed Laurie, were *defined* by their conspicuous consumption: “the distinctive fact about teenagers’ behaviour is economic,” and this framed the discrete society they created for themselves. The economic definition of teenagers also illuminated their patterns of socialisation: expenditure on “things that give immediate pleasure and little lasting use” was not just a personal indulgence but also had a communicative function: one could only participate in a largely commercial teenage culture by spending money.<sup>643</sup> Laurie recognised the economic transaction across the counter as a major new mode of interaction between adults and youths, but also noted that this mercantile relation created a conflict of interest between the two parties, with adult merchants and businessmen trying to ‘fleece the young’; and market research like that of Abrams only made that exploitation easier.<sup>644</sup>

The ‘youth industry’ that sprang up to meet teenage consumer demand performed two mutually constitutive functions – to *create* the Teenager (Abrams), and to then *exploit* him. This fed back into the discourse about youth culture and the emergence of the Teenager as a social-economic type, in a way pacifying some of the more resentful attitudes toward ‘affluent youths’.

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<sup>640</sup> Marwick, *Sixties*, 59.

<sup>641</sup> Mark Abrams, *The Teenage Consumer* (London: The London Press Exchange LTD, 1959), 10.

<sup>642</sup> Abrams, 9-10.

<sup>643</sup> Laurie, 9-13, 74

<sup>644</sup> Laurie, 13, 59.

Considering teenagers as juvenile delinquents served to exclude them from society, whereas considering them as consumers put them on a par with adults, who were forced to acknowledge teenage participation. Laurie credited Abrams with calming enraged adult opinion of teenage 'idleness' and 'superficiality', and reconciling it with what teenagers were really like. This was aided by the emergence as adolescents, around 1960, of the first 'bulge' children, who were seen as a less violent and more self-absorbed lot than the Teds only a few years their seniors. The younger adolescents, suggested Laurie, were emancipated by their openness and sensitivity to outside influences, making their identity formation less dependent on gang culture.<sup>645</sup>

The tendency in postwar Britain was to see all adolescents as problematic while ignoring or belittling their role as serious agents of economic growth and commercial innovation; yet this tendency was not particular to Britain.<sup>646</sup> The negative representation of youth culture in the 1950s and early 1960s as characterised by gangs and conspicuous consumption was significantly informed by the association with American popular culture. The threat of corrosive Americanisation of British culture in affluence was not pure myth. Abrams pointed out that working-class tastes and values characterised the vast majority of British teenagers; but with no domestic model for their spending, they turned to "the one industrial country in the world that has such experience," namely the United States.<sup>647</sup> British manufacturers struggled with the shift from a hitherto inert, loyal and consistent adult market toward dynamic and ever-changing teenage consumers, who looked for cheap new and untraditional mass-produced goods.<sup>648</sup>

Music was central to the distinction of young tastes from mainstream tastes. Music technology itself was transformed in 1948 with the introduction of 33rpm long-player albums (more durable than the heavier, more brittle 78rpm ones) and 45rpm seven-inch singles, which fast outgrew the sales of sheet music, shooting from 4 million singles sold in 1955 to 52 million by 1960. By 1960 the teenage market and its performers dominated the 'hit parades', themselves only

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<sup>645</sup> Davis, *Youth*, 157-158, 166; Laurie, 17-26.

<sup>646</sup> Rock and Cohen, 288, 294, 300, 302, 314; Hennessy, 492.

<sup>647</sup> Abrams, 19, 13-14.

<sup>648</sup> Osgerby, "Young Ones," 12, 17.

introduced in 1952 with the *New Musical Express* Top Twelve. Teenagers were dominant not necessarily because they could buy more records, but because they formed the largest *identifiable* market (£830 million annually, making up 40% of the market), meaning big revenues from teenage tastes. Music was also important to youth socialisation patterns: teens congregated around their favourite performers, divided by star allegiances, and followed them in films as well as in old dance halls and variety theatres, which were reinvigorated by the new trends; music was also consumed in 'milk bars' and 'expresso bars', to the sounds of American or Americanised hits from jukeboxes.<sup>649</sup>

The American influence on the style and content of British music took many forms. From the resistance of folk revivalists like Ewan MacColl, through the fascination with traditional jazz, considered around 1960 to be more 'sincere' and 'authentic' than faddish rock'n'roll, and embraced along with MacColl as part of the leftist activism of CND (as above); on to the lighter, upbeat dance hall swing numbers of working-class areas; then the digested New Orleans fusion assimilated into Skiffle, best exemplified by Lonnie Donegan, which was popular because anyone could play it on household instruments; and then the more straightforward dilutions of black rhythm'n'blues in white rock'n'roll, with English singers like Tommy Steele ('discovered' in Soho café the 2-Is) and Cliff Richard, accompanied on guitar, imitating American singing accents. Here, too, older record producers and artist managers exploited young talent and rebranded it for mass consumption, stylistically fusing American rock'n'roll with the familiar British variety tradition.<sup>650</sup>

Other media attempted to latch on to the commercial success of music with the youth audience. Television, both commercial and public, adapted early to young tastes with programmes like 'Hit Parade' (1952) and 'Music Shop' (1956), and then 'Six-Five Special' (1957) and 'Juke Box Jury' (1959). Imported American 'teenpics' wooed young audiences back to cinemas with *Blackboard Jungle* (1955) and *Rock Around the Clock* (1956), and were soon followed by lighter British imitations like *The Young Ones* (1961) and *Summer Holiday*

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<sup>649</sup> Sandbrook, 456, 462; Osgerby, "Young Ones," 12-14; Anthony Bicat, "Fifties Children: Sixties People," in Bogdanor and Skidelsky (eds.), 324-326.

<sup>650</sup> Sandbrook, 465-484, in particular 475; Osgerby, *Youth*, 119-120.

(1963). Public radio, until then a popular medium, was encumbered by 'needletime' regulations and only caught up with teen tastes in 1967 with the establishment of BBC Radio One. In the meantime it lost listeners to foreign stations, like Radio Luxembourg and the American Forces Network, and later to 'pirate' radio, like Radio Caroline and Radio London. The adaptation of public broadcasting to youth tastes did not please everyone, and a coordinated popular movement emerged to influence it back onto 'decent' programming, most notably with Mary Whitehouse's National Viewers and Listeners Association, established in 1963.<sup>651</sup>

American popular culture thoroughly influenced what has been called the British 'youthful oppositional style' – not just in music – thus demonstrating the largely derivative nature of British youth culture of the 1950s. The American cultural influence, like many of its followers, was bohemian but middle-class, drawing on the Beat myth and by postwar French Existentialist thought and fiction (as with some Angry writing). This tendency also imported the exoticist/primitivist idolisation of 'negro culture' and the American south, with its emphasis on modern jazz and dance; recreational drug use, sometimes imbued with non-Western mysticism; and its self-definition as iconoclastic and avant-garde. Yet even when 'oppositional', youth styles still conformed to style herds (Teds, Beats, mods, rockers) and class backgrounds.<sup>652</sup>

However, American cultural influences aggravated the British 'racial problem' and its class underpinnings. The predominant youth attitude toward black American culture was its appropriation, as with rock'n'roll among Teds and rockers, without acknowledging its black roots.<sup>653</sup> Instead, this culture was displaced and projected onto an exoticised white mainstream American culture, what Sinfield called "a generalized version of gangsters, 'automobiles' and

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<sup>651</sup> Osgerby, "Young Ones," 13; Sandbrook, 463; Osgerby, *Youth*, 99.

<sup>652</sup> Compare, for example, "The Noonday Underground" (99-112) and "The Life and Hard Time of a Teenage London Society Girl" (225-244), in Tom Wolfe, *The Mid-Atlantic Man, and Other New Breeds in England and America* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969 [1968]). See also Marwick, *Sixties*, 55; Davis, *Youth*, 178.

<sup>653</sup> Originating in 1954 with US radio disk-jockey Alan Freed, the term 'rock'n'roll' itself was essentially a 'white' euphemism for black rhythm'n'blues. Sandbrook, 459.

Hollywood.”<sup>654</sup> Urban Britain of the 1950s did not offer white youths a proximity to black culture that in America had let it into mainstream white culture through the back door. Instead, racial prejudice in Britain was ubiquitous: West-Indian immigrants were just about tolerated, because they could not be ignored, and black Americans, with their culture displaced, hardly figured at all. At least to the government these racial tensions seemed contained, and Macmillan’s government did not legislate to restrict immigration until 1962 because it thought that the public was generally uninterested in such a measure. Then again, the political elite, still being mostly upper class, was slow to understand the fullness of the racial tensions among the working classes who absorbed the (mostly West-Indian) immigrants. The 1958 riots had taken many, in government and across Britain, by surprise.<sup>655</sup>

‘Americanisation’ had a mixed reception in Britain, regarded on the one hand as straightforward cultural imperialism, ‘Coca-Colonisation’ or ‘affluence-borne decline’, and celebrated as introducing an un-British vibrancy that liberated now-affluent British youths of national traditions.<sup>656</sup> To the old British elites this widespread popular advancement came at the cost of empire itself, including its power, prestige and old hierarchies – fostering a declinist *mentalité* shared by old imperialists (Eden) and pragmatists (Macmillan) alike. In a revealing comment from his time as housing minister, Macmillan dryly observed in his diary how the “proletariat,” having come into its own, was “determined to maintain its standard of ‘panem and circenses’ at all costs.”<sup>657</sup> Yet it was Macmillan’s governments that were accused precisely of a ‘bread and circuses’ policy: endorsing short-term or temporary economic measures that produced the

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<sup>654</sup> Sinfield, 152.

<sup>655</sup> Osgerby, *Youth*, 123, citing Paul Gilroy and Errol Lawrence, “Two-Tone Britain: White and Black Youth and the Politics of Anti-Racism,” in *Multi-Racist Britain*, ed. by P. Cohen and H.S. Bains, (London: Pluto Press, 1988), 128-129; Marwick, *Society*, 132; Hennessy, 496-501; on racialism in British immigration policies see Hampshire, 60-70.

<sup>656</sup> Sinfield, 156; Hennessy compares the first-hand impressions of Hoggart (the famous ‘spiritual dry-rot’) and the excited young Richard Eyre; Hennessy, 15-16. On the consequences of this liberation see Wolfe’s “The Mid-Atlantic Man,” in Wolfe, 43-60.

<sup>657</sup> Hennessy, 19; quoting from *The Macmillan Diaries: The Cabinet Years, 1950-1957*, ed. by Peter Catterall (London: Macmillan, 2003), 186 (entry for 27 September 1952); also Hennessy, 28-29.

tangible effect of affluence and profusion of goods, at the expense of more responsible long-term measures.<sup>658</sup> Ultimately, Macmillan himself was ambivalent about affluence and the conditions it created for Britain's youth, on the one hand defending his policies – “the temptations of comfort and affluence are not an argument in favour of poverty” – but on the other hand admitting behind closed doors in 1959 that “we all really know that in the last 40 years the morals of this country have declined.”<sup>659</sup>

### **Colin MacInnes and *Absolute Beginners***

Colin MacInnes (1914-1976) was an astute observer of teenage mores in the late 1950s. This was surprising for two reasons: when *City of Spades*, the first novel in his London trilogy, was published in 1957 he was already 42 years old; and he was remarkably attuned to the youth cultures of the time considering they were generally associated with working-class and lower-middle-class youths. For MacInnes, despite his impoverished later life, was well-born: the second son of the novelist Angela Thirkell, the great grandson of the painter Sir Edward Burne-Jones, as well as first cousin of prime minister Stanley Baldwin and of the author Rudyard Kipling – a relation of whom he was particularly proud.

This unlikely chronicler of late 1950s British youth culture produced probably the best fictional account of the new subculture in all its complexity, leading his *Absolute Beginners* to be compared with J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951). The two novels shared the template of ‘the world through the eyes of a contemporary adolescent’, as did Françoise Sagan's *Bonjour tristesse* (1954) between them and Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1962) afterwards. These novels show the estrangement of postwar youths from an established order that seems either trivial or fake; the painful coming of age that teaches adolescents of their weaknesses and strengths; the sense of self-confident

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<sup>658</sup> Michael Pinto-Duschinsky, “Bread and Circuses? The Conservatives in Office, 1951-1964,” in Bogdanor and Skidelsky (eds.), 56-58.

<sup>659</sup> Hennessy, 538, citing James Margach, *The Abuse of Power: the War between Downing Street and the Media from Lloyd George to Callaghan* (London: W.H. Allen, 1978), 121; and Hennessy, 511, citing Mark Jarvis, *Conservative Governments, Morality and Social Change in Affluent Britain, 1957-1964* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 161.

knowing or cleverness; fresh, cynical outlooks related in new linguistic affectations; and some violence and cruelty (sometimes toward oneself, as in *Catcher*). These fictional protagonists project a “hopeful and vulnerable sense of life” tested by irony and drama as they take on the world alone, with “marvellously inadequate equipment”.<sup>660</sup> Sagan’s novel, buoyed by immediate scandal, was translated and published in Britain in 1955, and forms a link between Salinger and MacInnes. Salinger’s Holden and Sagan’s Cécile are affluent metropolitan adolescents rebelling in their little ways against their stifling privilege and the adult world. Yet, being older and more cynical, Cécile is closer to MacInnes’s poorer and unnamed protagonist. Both are sexually active, have a complex understanding of adult types, and are less sentimental and idealistic than Holden.

Not that MacInnes had intended to write a new *Catcher*. Working as a critic and essayist for cultural reviews like *Encounter*, *Twentieth Century* and *Queen*, MacInnes started to address aspects of popular youth culture, thus introducing the topic to the intelligentsia. In essays like ‘Young England, Half English’ MacInnes instantly grasped early British pop music as a key to the so-called ‘teenage revolution’, identifying its roots in black American music but noting how it was not wholly Americanised.<sup>661</sup> This essay’s title was chosen by MacInnes with *Encounter* co-editor Irving Kristol to allude to familiar earlier titles such as Orwell’s essay ‘England, Your England’ (in his *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 1941) and D.H. Lawrence’s short story ‘England My England’ (1922). The gesture was toward the radical ‘condition of England’ tradition which stressed individual integrity and groundedness as essential English qualities – taken to be the secret of British endurance in the First (Lawrence) and the Second (Orwell) World Wars. Both writers suggested that the move away from one’s local, traditional, popular roots toward some kind of cosmopolitanism – be it to

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<sup>660</sup> This was said of Salinger, but holds true for Sagan and MacInnes, too. R.W.B. Lewis, “Adam as Hero in the Age of Containment,” in *The American Adam: Innocence Tragedy and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1955), 199-200.

<sup>661</sup> Davis, *Youth*, 171-173; Colin MacInnes, “Young England, Half English: the Pied Piper from Bermondsey,” *England, Half English*, rev. ed. (London: The Hogarth Press, 1986 [1961]), 11-16 (originally in *Encounter*, December 1957).

the upper classes (Lawrence's Egbert) or to Marxist internationalism (Orwell) – comes at the cost of English assurance and strength and threatens Englishness itself.<sup>662</sup> Suggesting that in 1957 England was already only 'half English', MacInnes implied that English tradition and constancy were being eroded by wholesale adoption rather than adaptation-by-appropriation of American popular culture.<sup>663</sup>

The writing of *Absolute Beginners*, from April to November 1958, became more urgent following the race riots featured in its last section, first in Nottingham's St. Anne's Well, and then at Notting Hill, west London. MacInnes's immediate response was that the riots "will seem, with Suez, the key event of the post-war period," but also that they were at risk of being obscured by the "general tendency... in editorial comment to find alibis. There are vicious coloureds. Teds are frustrated psychopaths. This is a 'race riot', not a race riot."<sup>664</sup> Incorporating the riots into his novel-in-progress, MacInnes based his detailed description of incidents on the Manchester Guardian's reportage.<sup>665</sup> Yet, facing the same critical dismissal as Sillitoe, he continued to claim that his intention was not documentary but rather lyrical, "poetic evocations of a human situation, with undertones of social criticism of it."<sup>666</sup> There are other similarities between *Absolute Beginners* and *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*: Arthur Seaton dresses like a Teddy boy but is otherwise, like MacInnes's protagonist, an individualist and a non-conformist, not a gang creature; both feel their youth is

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<sup>662</sup> George Orwell, "England Your England," in *England Your England and Other Essays* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1953 [1941]), 192-224; D.H. Lawrence, "England, My England," in *England, My England* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960 [1922]), 7-40.

<sup>663</sup> MacInnes, "Young England, Half English," 15.

<sup>664</sup> MacInnes in unpublished memorandum dated 5 September 1958, quoted in Tony Gould, *Inside Outsider: the Life and Times of Colin MacInnes* (London: Allison & Busby, 1993 [1983]), 134.

<sup>665</sup> Gould, 134; Colin MacInnes, *Absolute Beginners* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1986 [1964]), 192-197, 201-205, 232. All subsequent main text page references to the novel are to this edition. Compare the vivid portrayal of black characters in *Absolute Beginners* with the barely present character of Sam in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*.

<sup>666</sup> MacInnes in an unattributed comment, quoted in Harriet Blodgett, "City of Other Worlds: The London Novels of Colin MacInnes," *Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction* XVIII, 1 (1976), 105.



ending and look for stability; and, discounting north-south differences, both protagonists share local and inward-looking frames of reference, pushing the wider world to the background. The interjection of this world into their lives occurs through the racial element, which seems as foreign to *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* as it is central to *Absolute Beginners*, with the two novels reflecting two stages in the social transformation of late-1950s Britain.<sup>667</sup>

*Absolute Beginners* is narrated by a nameless teenage photographer nearing the end of his eighteenth year, living an independent life in a west London immigrant neighbourhood he dubs 'Napoli' for its colourful squalor. In the recent past he used to date Suzette, with whom he is still infatuated, but who prefers black men and is about to enter a marriage of convenience with her middle-aged homosexual boss, Henley. He has a tense and contemptuous relationship with his mother and a soft spot for her hen-pecked second husband, his father, whose wasted life he mainly pities. Two other figures from the narrator's past are his half-brother Vernon, six years his senior, whom he despises for his earnest, straight-laced ways, the ways of someone who has never had a youth; and Ed the Ted, a lost working-class kid who joined a gang and is portrayed as an insecure bumbling idiot. Most of the narrative takes place in affluent (Kensington, Mayfair) and less affluent (Bayswater, Notting Hill) west London, where the narrator lives, and in Soho, where he goes for his diversions. A motley crew of token secondary characters surrounds the protagonist: lesbians (Big Jill), gay prostitutes (Hoplite), 'spades' (Mr. Cool), Jewish intellectuals (Mannie Katz); an oily Australian television presenter (Call-me-Cobber), his model girlfriend (the ex-Deb-of-last-year), the gossip columnist Dido Lament, the exploitative advertising executive (Vendice Partners), the "scruffy and disapproving" (145) Marxist Ron Todd, and the disquieting, calculating teenage pimp, the Wizard.

The plot is organised into four uneven parts according to the summer months over which it takes place. As this is a coming-of-age story, this duration is nostalgically recognised retrospectively as a last summer of innocence before

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<sup>667</sup> *Absolute Beginners* is still absent from most critical analyses of the British postwar novel. Nick Bentley, "Translating English: Youth, Race and Nation in Colin MacInnes's *City of Spades* and *Absolute Beginners*," *Connotations: A Journal for Critical Debate* 13, 1-2 (2003-2004), 149.

everything changes: this is another theme linking *Absolute Beginners* with Sagan's summertime romance in *Bonjour tristesse*, mentioned above, as well as with another successful contemporary novel, L.P. Hartley's *The Go-Between* (1953), set in the 'golden summer' of 1914. The sense of splendour and blossoming is thwarted by the retrospective knowledge of the impending corruption of order. The anticipation of the end of summer is palpable, and the time remaining is felt not only to run out but to accelerate as it elapses (again, a gesture of belatedness): 'In June' is the first and by far the longest part of *Absolute Beginners*, but is an exposition unfolding over one day, while subsequent, shorter parts show events occurring over longer time spans. 'In July' and 'In August' expand on the narrator's family situation and on his rift with Suzette, also showing the first signs of violent racial tension. The penultimate 'In September' witnesses the riots, affecting the narrator more profoundly than the death of his father or the final consummation of his love for Suzette. Failing to move people into action by his witness accounts, the narrator, feeling helpless and disoriented, attempts to leave the country, but is finally reconciled with London as his home for all its contemporary ugliness.

To discuss *Absolute Beginners* in the context of cultural pessimism would seem to be reading it against the intended grain, as MacInnes maintained that he wanted to view British youth optimistically, as a generation full of promise. Nevertheless, he adds,

it would be equally possible to see, in the teenage neutralism and indifference to politics, and self-sufficiency, and instinct for enjoyment - in short, in their kind of happy mindlessness - the raw material for crypto-fascisms of the worst kind. I don't sense this myself at all, though I may very well be wrong.<sup>668</sup>

It has been suggested that a desire to provide an 'optimistic view' is one reason MacInnes did not elaborate on the theme of Teddy Boys in the novel: *Absolute*

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<sup>668</sup> Colin MacInnes, "Pop Songs and Teenagers," *England, Half English*, 59 (originally in *The Twentieth Century*, February 1958).

*Beginners* embodies “all the left-liberal hopes of the day.”<sup>669</sup> Yet what MacInnes overlooked before 1958, Anthony Burgess foregrounded in *A Clockwork Orange* in 1962, a novel based on the juvenile delinquency that he saw around him in Sussex: Teddy boy thuggery and mod and rocker riots on beaches and in seaside towns. This casual violence, portrayed through the eyes of the teenage protagonist Alex, is shown, perhaps forgivingly, as a natural phase that disappears with time and maturity. Unlike MacInnes, Burgess chose to represent teenage violence at one remove, as a fantastic, futuristic narrative complete with its own barely intelligible juvenile argot, the *nadsat*.<sup>670</sup> Like the fictional present of *Absolute Beginners*, the fictional future of *A Clockwork Orange* is not politicised. This stance, together with its aesthetisation of violence, is the stuff of *A Clockwork Orange*’s ‘crypto-fascism’, which suggested that freely choosing evil is better than being conditioned or coerced to disavow it.<sup>671</sup> If *Absolute Beginners* represents bright but lost young things, then *A Clockwork Orange* represents similarly lost but much darker young things. Both MacInnes and Burgess were outsiders to the realities they represented, and thus in writing about a certain underworld the authorial stance of MacInnes was closer to that of Orwell than to that of Genet. Like Orwell, MacInnes was well-born and ‘slummed it’ in order to explore his subjects; in that sense he is more a journalist or a voyeur than he is a true participant.<sup>672</sup> Orwell’s influence can be felt in the intricate ways in which the novel maintains an optimistic outlook about a pessimistic narrator who more often than not expresses the author’s own opinions.

MacInnes’s 18-year-old narrator introduces the other younger characters as if they belong to a different generation. He describes the 14-year-old singer

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<sup>669</sup> Gould, 128; quotation from Sinfield, 128.

<sup>670</sup> While the bulk of the novel was already written beforehand, its *nadsat* and futurist stylistics were added following Burgess’s experiences of the Russian Teds, the *stilyagi*, on a 1961 trip to Leningrad. Andrew Biswell, *The Real Life of Anthony Burgess* (London: Picador, 2005), 237.

<sup>671</sup> Burgess later opined that the book was actually ‘too didactic to be artistic’; Biswell, 255.

<sup>672</sup> Gould, 108; in this sense both MacInnes and Orwell follow the example of writers like Henry Mayhew, whose *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851-2) was the first systematic journalistic study of the capital’s lower social strata.

Laurie London as “a sign of decadence. This teenage thing is getting out of hand,” leading ‘teenager’ to “become a dirty word or, at any rate, a square one” (10). From “a real savage splendour” (11) that the teenage phenomenon had initially held, teenagers have become exploited, either by market and media who “buy us younger every year” (9) or by themselves, “the crafty little absolute beginners” (10). Even at his tender age, the narrator already thinks ‘things are not as they used to be’ and that ‘it’s all gone downhill’, related to a sense of an ending. He feels robbed of “the teenage dream” – by younger teens and by his own maturation – and is adamant to make the most of the time left: “I was out for kicks and fantasy” (11). It is from this complex perspective on youth that the narrator recounts the plot: still part of it, but knowing his time is running out; upset at teen ‘decadence’ but wanting to join the party; speaking for teenagers in general, but always from his individual position.

Young people in *Absolute Beginners* possess many of the typical traits of postwar youths already discussed. They are mostly concerned with themselves and with their specific identity construction, their ‘uniqueness’ – although this is often carried out by conforming to gangs and assuming their characteristics. Teenagers share a nomadic, restless existence, presented as ‘children of nobody’ who are one another’s frame of reference. To the narrator this process had started, embarrassingly, back in the Scouts: “for the first time, here was a family: at any rate, a lot, a mob, a click I could belong to” (68). There is, however, a part of the youth clannishness and cult of coolness that relies on a delicate balance between conformity and individual originality. Still, even when it is chosen from among given choices, individual self-definition overrides social forces: the narrator chose to live in ‘Napoli’ because it offered him a rare opportunity: “if you have loot, and can look after yourself, they treat you as a man, which is what you are”, and so, “however horrible the area is, you’re free” (53). Even prospective affluence, represented in Wiz turning to pimping, is not an end in itself: “I want to be rich all right, but I don’t want to be *hooked*” (108). And so, even in the face of Ed the Ted who is about to mug him, he reasserts that “I’m not being summoned by anyone except the magistrate” (152).

The brighter youths recognised the novelty of their existence as a new and distinct social stratum: “when the kids discovered that, for the first time since centuries of kingdom-come, they’d money, which hitherto had always been

denied to us at the best time in life to use it, namely, when you're young and strong... a real savage splendour in the days when we found that no one couldn't sit on our faces any more..." (11). Just several years earlier, when Vernon was a teenager, "there just weren't *any*: can you believe it? Not any authentic teenagers at all. In those days, it seems, you were just an over-grown boy, or an under-grown man, life didn't seem to cater for anything whatever else between" (39). The narrator is fully appreciative of his circumstances: "what an age it is I've grown up in, with everything possible to mankind at last, and every horror too, you could imagine! And what a time it's been in England, what a period of fun and hope and foolishness and sad stupidity!" (233-234). Metropolitan British youths were still exploring their new privilege: "it took me years myself to discover... that youth has power, a kind of divine power straight from mother nature" (13). This sense of empowerment was not shared by "the other two million teenagers they say exist throughout our country" (13). Still, teenagers started behaving like inheritors: "even here in this Soho, the headquarters of the adult mafia, you could everywhere see the signs of un-silent teenage revolution" (74).

The teenage narrator is a typical adolescent whose paradoxical juvenile egoism leads him to both see himself as deservedly at the centre of things and to resist a scrutiny which he finds menacing. He observes a "sparring stage that always seems necessary with the seniors" (22) in which the 'absolute beginners' need to stake their place. This establishes difference that allows teenagers to be considered differently from adults: the narrator explains his abstinence from liquor "because I get all the kicks I need from me" (23). He also resists the ex-Deb's overly-intimate inquisitiveness, seeing it as another projection of adult sex obsessions on teenagers (79-80). All adult behaviour is seen as threatening, "the old blackmail of the parents and all oldies against the kiddos" (44), and "it's only you adult numbers who want to destroy one another" (26). Destroy they do: at 48, the narrator's father is spiritually "squashed by a combination of my Mum and the 1930s" (31), being "what's known as a failure," with "no mind to speak of" (32). Moreover, "even at the best of times you can't tell even your father and mother anything that really *matters* to you" (183). Viewed from the 'absolute beginner' side, the adult-adolescent difference needs to be established on

egalitarian terms, as the protagonist tells his father: "I've not got your experience, but one thing I'm not, please, is a fool" (175).

No less important than the teenager/adult distinction are the distinctions between teenagers and children, and among different teenager types. The narrator is rattled by his treatment at the bank as "it was all so unnecessary and so old-fashioned treating a teenager like a kid" (30). Youth is important, however fleeting, as Vernon finds out when told "Somehow you missed the teenage rave, and you never seem to have had a youth" (35). Even Big Jill, the narrator's neighbour and confidante, "is very wise, *in spite of* being not far in her twenties" (56, my italics), so despite her merits her difference is observed. Children are different, with a misleading charm and a disregard for the maxim of coolness: "I mistrust them, and consider they're a menace, because they're so damned wilful and *energetic*" (49). Yet teenagers are not without their problems: "turning into mindless butterflies all of the same size and colour, that have to flutter round exactly the same flowers, on exactly the same gardens" (75). Each teenage type has a uniform that announces it: Ed the Ted (46-47), Hoplite the Dandy (57), "the Misery Kid and his trad drag" and Dean Swift the Mod (70-71). The narrator views these types with detachment, himself about "to move up a category or two" from being an 'absolute beginner' (188); his sentiments lie with the Mod crowd, for their self-control, attention to stylistic detail, and rejection of the Ted ethos ("Teds, semi-Teds... you know... local hooligans...": 155).

The novel espouses a somewhat idealised image of a general and unified 'youth culture', heralding an age of 'new classlessness'. The narrator makes it clear, first to Mickey (25) and again to Vernon (35) that he is interested in neither class nor politics. Vernon's accusation of the narrator as having no social conscience prompts a more express disavowal: "I do *not* reject the working-classes, and I do *not* belong to the upper-classes, for one and the same simple reason... I'm just not interested in the whole class crap that seems to needle you" (41). This is reminiscent of his slightly older contemporary, Sillitoe's Arthur Seaton, an 'opposing self' interested not in overthrowing the class structure of oppression, but only with getting his own back.<sup>673</sup> Nevertheless, MacInnes's

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<sup>673</sup> Cf. Sillitoe, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, 202-203; Taylor, *After the War*, 113, 116, 128.

narrator notes class signifiers, as with the “old Victorian lower-middle tumble-downs” in Notting Hill who “live on like shells” when their owners’ descendants were relocated to the outer suburbs (51); or with his enumeration of social types and age groups remaining in ‘Napoli’ (53, 66). The class and race structure still exists in the novel, as its alternatives indicate: in jazz clubs “no one, not a soul, cares what your class is, or what your race is, or what your income... as long as you dig the scene and can behave yourself, and have left all that crap behind you” (69). Like Vian, MacInnes sees in jazz a basic humanist resistance to politics, war, commercial exploitation, and racial and sexual injustice. Social redemption depends on well-meaning individuals.<sup>674</sup>

Consumption serves in *Absolute Beginners* to doubly define young people by their conspicuous consumption and by its contrast with the spending habits of their elders: the parent generation is resentful of the young’s affluence, opportunities and confidence. The narrator’s father “always comes back again to... what a much better time I have than he had in the 1930s” (36); “you’ve simply no idea what that pre-war period was like. Poverty, unemployment, fascism, and disaster and, worst of all, no chance, no opportunity...it was a terrible time for the young” (37); “I should have had my youth in the 1950s, like you have” (38). Mother chips in, too, with a look that says “what is this monster I’ve created?” (45), exclaiming “You’ve too much spending money, that’s your trouble... all you teenagers have... and you’re only minors! With no responsibilities to need all that spending money for” (43). Even Vernon, only slightly older, thinks teenagers are “dissolute” and “immoral” (41). The narrator, too, reflects on “how your elders are always so suspicious when they hear that you’ve made money! They just can’t credit that little junior has grown up a bit, and turned some honest coin” (174).

Consumption also opened the door to teenage exploitation and, in the novel, the celebrated “teenage revolution” is apparent precisely through businesses, goods and the commercial transaction (74-75). “It’s been a two-way twist, this teenage party,” says Wiz, “Exploitation of the kiddos by the conscripts, and exploitation of themselves” (10). The narrator adds that youth is the best time of life “before the newspapers and telly got hold of this teenage

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<sup>674</sup> Sinfield, 169.

fable and prostituted it" (11). He is astonished at how some teenagers are oblivious to their exploitation, like the Kid-from-Outer-Space, who defends television, protesting "you got to believe *something* in this world" (89). The narrator acknowledges that television offered "a sort of non-university education" through "experts and professors", but regarding real-life concerns – jazz, teenagers, juvenile delinquency – "the whole dam thing seems utterly unreal. Cooked up in a hurry, and made to sound simpler than it is... they're crap" (166). Ultimately, given a chance, teenagers – like Zesty the English rock'n'roller (118) and Seth Samaritan the jazz-pop singer (146) – exploit each other, too.

MacInnes had maintained elsewhere that despite first appearances, British youth culture was not completely taken over by Americanisation: while imported American popular culture was increasingly prominent, English popular culture, even while copying it, retained some of its own traditional or home-grown traits.<sup>675</sup> In *Absolute Beginners*, Zesty's case sticks out: "though Zesty caught all the necessary US overtones to send the juveniles that he performed for, the words he thought up were actually about the London teenage kids – I mean not just 'Ah luv yew, Oh yess Ah du' that could be about anyone, but numbers like *Ugly Usherette*, and *Chickory with my Chick*, and *Jean, your Jeans!*, and *Nasty Newington Narcissus*" (118). For that he wins the narrator's approval, insisting "English kids... be English kids, not West Ken yanks and bogus imitation Americans," although "that doesn't mean I'm *anti* the whole US thing" (58). What he opposes is the Lonnie Donegan-style of 'adapted authenticity' that the Marxist 'ballad-and-blues' movement espoused, mostly "ancient English, or modern American" styles and too little "about us and now" (147). Otherwise, he is keen on American 'spade music', particularly Mississippi delta jazz, played by Czar Tusdie's orchestra, "one of the great bands of all time, and American, and coloured" (188). In dancing, too, it is clear to all, as the ex-Deb enthuses, that "They're the best dancers in the world!" (222).

The narrator acknowledges that "America launched the teenage movement, there's no denying" (59), and sees it as the future. He does, however, find the overbearing influence of American culture on British popular culture

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<sup>675</sup> Gould, 127-128; MacInnes, "Pop Songs and Teenagers", 56-57.



problematic: “we’ve got to produce our own variety, and not imitate the Americans... or anybody, for that matter” (59). The playing field does not seem level, though, with plentiful “yank mags” (23, 103), and film stars and singing sensations that make “the local product” look bad (59). This is due to the half-fantastic status, and thus the temptation, of anything American. To the narrator, Nebraska, Hoplite’s soldier paramour, looks stereotypical, “a perfectly ordinary young US product – fresh, washed, and double-rinsed as they manufacture them in thousands over there” (112); Hoplite, however, even after losing romantic interest in Nebraska, would still “love to see the occupation army... tailored uniforms, and gorgeous work clothes, like their films of prisons. You’re not tempted?” (169).

The tempting, optimistic Americanisation in *Absolute Beginners* reflects the grim, declining State of England: like the trees along the Thames, “all rotting away gradually, and *old*: which, of course, England is” (177). Britain’s position, claims the narrator, “is that she hasn’t found her position” (27).<sup>676</sup> In fact, he says later, “It’s because I’m a patriot, that I can’t bear our country” (59): “how horrible this country is, how dreary, how lifeless, how blind and busy over trifles!” (49). This is reminiscent of Orwell’s earlier claim that the benign patriotism uniting the English had been divorced from intellectual concerns in favour of a gentle privacy and individuality of petty life, leaving them a family still, but one with the wrong members in control.<sup>677</sup> Mannie suggests that “the trouble about this country... is the total flight from reality in every sector... the price of riches is that you export reality to where it is you get your money from” (98). “England,” Mannie adds, “is dreadful, and the English – they’re barbarians. But three things of theirs I cherish most sincerely – the lovely tongue... and the nosey instinct... and their own radicals... and everything else I can forget” (99). ‘Everything else’ being, one supposes, what Orwell had called “their old-fashioned outlook, their graded snobberies, their mixture of bawdiness and hypocrisy, their extreme gentleness, their deeply moral attitude to life” – not

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<sup>676</sup> The former American Secretary of State Dean Acheson famously made a similar comment some time later, suggesting to an audience at West Point on 5 December 1962 that “Britain has lost an empire and has not yet found a role”; quoted in Hennessy, 274.

<sup>677</sup> Orwell, 195-198, 210, 220.

forgetting the residual barbarism of the English and the traditional hypocrisy and thoughtlessness in their treatment of empire.<sup>678</sup>

The narrator is guided by this social concern, rather than by stereotypical teenage disengagement: “all the horrors I see around me, especially the English ones, *I feel responsible* for... just as much as for the few nice things I dig” (147, my italics). Topping these concerns are the race riots and the ‘coloured problem’ they throw up, rattling the narrator by the impression of general complicity, “a sort of conspiracy in the air to pretend what was happening in Napoli, wasn’t happening: or, if it was, it somehow didn’t signify at all” (215). Urban violence was normal; the outrage was the cover-up: “so far as the government and top cats who control things were concerned, these riots might not have happened at all, or have been in some other country” (228). The riots are the point when the narrator realises “I don’t understand my own country any more” (198), “I’d fallen right out of love with England. And even with London... the whole dam group of islands could sink under the sea, and all I wanted was shake my feet off of them...” (228). England has been defamiliarised and the narrator disillusioned.

Attempting to emulate metropolitan teen argot, MacInnes extensively employed non-standard English in both dialogue and narration.<sup>679</sup> This comes in two main forms: the up-to-date Mod, Ted or camp colloquialisms; and the intended play with words and metaphors, which only partly succeeds in imbuing them with new meanings. With this MacInnes shows another aspect of his Orwellian bent, mocking dying metaphors, pretentious turns of phrase, and meaningless words criticised by Orwell a decade earlier.<sup>680</sup> Non-standard colloquialisms form the fabric of the novel’s realism, reflecting characters’ personalities and backgrounds. Misery Kid, a withdrawn ‘trad child’, mainly gazes out incuriously, uttering truncated sentences lacking in verbs: “She not meant to?” (71), or “This client no deposit?” (72). Amberley the columnist speaks with haughty authority: “The leader columns are aimed at the more

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<sup>678</sup> Quotation from Orwell, 197; see also 195, 199, 201.

<sup>679</sup> Another contemporary example of non-standard English in accounts of London life came with Nell Dunn’s *Up the Junction* (1963), where the narrator and her friends convey the fragile ‘kitchen-sink’ beauty of a changing Battersea.

<sup>680</sup> George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language,” *Collected Essays* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1961 [1946]), 337-351.

intelligent portions of the population – few though they may be,” and to the narrator, “I tremble to think, young man, that our country’s future’s in hands like yours” (140). The camper characters of Dido and Hoplite have their *darling*, precious way with over-the-top exclamations: “Oh, hul-lo infant prodigy... Are you hungering for something?” (111); “*Cute!* Oh, lordy me!” (112). By contrast, Ed the Ted’s English betrays an uneducated Cockney background: “Naher! Me? Espel me? Wot? Lissen! Me, R lef *them*, see? You fink I’m sof, or sumfink?” (48).

Both dialogues and narration ring with current slang, perhaps part of “the lovely tongue” to which Mannie referred. These are ‘cats’ and their ‘birds’ who all have ‘loot’, sitting in ‘dives’ or ‘teenage huts’ named ‘The Dubious’ and ‘Chez Nobody’ or talking on the ‘blower’, ‘digging’ and ‘wiggling’ each other, and calling each other ‘kid’, ‘doll’, ‘darl’ and ‘hon’. This clever talk is usually self-consciously ironic, fast-paced and irreverent. The narrator, about to be presented as a “teenage product,” plans to arrive in “age-group regalia” (110), and his “full teenage drag” contrasts with Vernon’s “floppy dung-coloured garments” (34). Being “un-sharp” (66) is to be avoided, as is the odd “corny old thought” (96) about romance. This prevalent mode of expression is often familiarising, bringing its objects down (or up) to eye level. Real young criminals like Flicker are “young lost-property toughies” (160), and spend their formative years in “delinquent cages” (161). Luckier ‘numbers’, like the narrator and his ‘blood brother’ the Wiz, simply learned living in “the school of life,” in “Brixton class” (85). Vendice the executive is dubbed “the balance-sheet product” (116), “the profit-and-loss one” and “the industrial chieftain” (117). His milieu is the “boyish”-seeming public school old boys, educated to bully each other as they later do with “some colony” (139). They live in safer, richer Kensington, “an Olde Englishe product like Changing the Guard, or Saville row suits, or Stilton cheese in big brown china jars, or any of those things they advertise in *Esquire* to make the Americans want to visit picturesque Great Britain” (21).

In some instances this broken English simply appropriates language to youth culture, also showing a margin of inarticulation in its outspokenness. A young yob is thus a “yoblet” (210), young black children are “little Spadelets” (66), and several children are “a crocodile of infants” (66). The narrator tells of how he “abluted” (191) and “hoofed it down the street” (227), and of his relief at

being “un-displeased” (210). Dido’s figure-hugging dress is “a white hold-me-tight creation” (111). Suzette’s old boyfriend was from “French Gaboon” (15); Omar the landlord “simply grins his teeth” (54); Mickey stands by his scooter “as if it was an Arab pony” (22); in the time before television one had “steam radio” (166); but now, the London skyline shows “clean new concrete cloud-kissers, rising up like felixes from the Olde Englishe squares” (10). Yet there is more than jollity in one besieged ‘spade’’s assertion of his equality, being “one of the Queen’s objects the same as any other” (208).

The narrator taps into a wide range of cultural references, highlighting the importance of music. Tommy Steele is preferred to Elvis Presley (58), and Billie Holiday (27-28, 145) and her producer, Norman Granz (81), are appreciated, while Ella Fitzgerald and Duke Ellington are thinly disguised as “Maria Bethlehem” and “Czar Tusdie” (188-189). Two tokens/types of celebrity – Winston Churchill and Marilyn Monroe – are mentioned in the same breath (165), indicating their parity in both familiarity and remoteness. The espresso barista “speaks authentic old-tyme *My Fair Lady* dialect!” (12), and the narrator’s mother reminds him of a Tennessee Williams character (42). These allusions are not restricted to popular culture: “The Last Days of Pompeii” becomes a new-style Belgravia coffee bar (17); King Canute is conjured up during a night swim in the Serpentine (108); Karl Marx is hastily mentioned (147); the evangelist Billy Graham is an ironic example of speaking up “so dam honest and convincing” (167); and Roger Bannister becomes the paradigm of sprinting (182). The irony is clear in the description of ‘respectable’ areas adjacent to ‘Napoli’ as Blake’s “England’s green and pleasant land” (219); and in the fresh memory of Suez as “that two-day battle with the Pharaohs we’re all trying to forget” (93); or indeed in the narrator’s surprise rescue amid the riots, concluded with Henry Stanley’s “Dr. Livingstone, I presume” (209).

Along with the use of word play and allusion, simpler metaphors also claim language and its images to the teen narrator, and here his disillusionment shows. The singer trailed through Soho by screaming fans is thus “the young Pied Piper” (75) – MacInnes’s journalistic label for Tommy Steele. Another, less savoury current trend is the Angry Young Men, who are mainly good for “the fish-and-chip wrapper dailies” (21) – a familiar naturalistic figure suggesting a shared greasiness as well as the ephemeral nature of fads (once in the papers,

they are already yesterday's news). While returning into London was "like coming home" (183), it is also regarded as "that old whore London" (14), raising "her bashed head again, like she was ashamed of her modern daughter down by the river" (48). 'Napoli' after the riots turns in the narrator's mind from his nest to a bull-ring (227). The moment of his souring and estrangement is resonant, showing the environment turning on its inhabitant and reminiscent of Merleau-Ponty's comment on spatial disruption: "When this happens to you... it's just like... the stones rise up from the pavement there and hit you, and the houses tumble, and the sky falls in... everything that you relied on, and all the natural things, do what you don't expect them to. Your sense of security, and of there being some plan, some idea behind it all somewhere, just disappears" (205).

The narrator's sense of estrangement comes from the disruption of his environment: this is curious because he derives his notions of normality and 'the natural' from the artifice comprising a cosmopolitan young man's life. Sometimes this outlook is shaped by popular readings, like when he notes "She mutely acquiesced, as the women's weeklies say" (45), or considers "the kids up in the Harrow road those days, who thought a book's an SF or a Western, if they thought it's anything" (67). Television is similarly irresistible but pernicious: some situations one is "unable not to watch, just like the telly" (175). Television is paradoxically both misrepresentative of reality and a sign of 'real' achievement in life, in becoming a 'television personality' (78, 169) – even Ed the Ted could do that, "appearing in a telly programme on the Ted question where he stared photogenically, and only grunted" (47). However deceptive, mass communication remains the frame of reference, and so Hoplite would rather look more than exemplary, like an advertisement (127). In the few instances he ventures outside of London, to "the country, that great green thing that hangs around outside the capital, with animals" (80), the narrator's notions of reality and normality are challenged as he tries to understand things through the familiar, seeing the power station "like a super-cinema with funnels stuck on it" (45), Boulter's lock bridge "like in Japanese murder pictures" (177), and Cookham village as "a real old village like you see on biscuit boxes" (179).

This birthday leisure voyage up the Thames taps into an existing complex relationship the narrator/protagonist has with the city. The narrator sees the city as a backdrop for the enactment of fantasy, as what it *could* be, and "what is

begun in reality has so often to be completed in fantasy” – for after all, “This is London, man, a capital, a great big city where every kind of race has lived ever since the Romans!” (157).<sup>681</sup> Here MacInnes nods toward Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1902) and the short discussion in its opening pages of Thames settlers past, particularly the Romans, and through them of the immoral imperial role of exploitation first and civilising second, redeemed only by the *idea* of imperialism.<sup>682</sup> Like Conrad’s Africans, MacInnes’s black population and ‘darkness’ are viewed from the outside. Effectively the narrator relates to the London blacks (West Indians rather than Africans) like the real-life Teds related to black (American) music and dance – by displacement. It is another, exoticist fantasy, enacted against the backdrop of London, ‘city of spades’.

Nevertheless, great and plentiful as it is, London has its limitations: “all this chat about the sea, and seafaring, and ships sailing out of London, made me begin to feel that hell, it really was ridiculous that here was I, nearly nineteen, and never yet left the city of my creation” (130). The alternative is charming: “If this is the country, why haven’t I shaken hands with it before – it’s glorious!” (172). The traditional, idealised English rural landscape contrasts with the violent urban riots, profoundly wrong “because the whole thing was just so *meaningless*,” and erupting with a “whole lot of unexpected force behind it” (192), triggering the sensations of crisis: weakness, nausea and fear. “They don’t know it, but our city’s getting dangerous!” (212), because its violent potential is contained along a class frontier: “Napoli was like a prison, or a concentration camp: inside, blue murder, outside, buses and evening papers and hurrying home to sausages and mash and tea” (219). These were the ordinary people that “just stood by, out of harm’s way... and *watched*... Quite decent, respectable people they seemed” (203), but they gazed into ‘Napoli’ as if into a gladiatorial circus.

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<sup>681</sup> Richard Wollheim’s review of the novel, quoted in Gould, 142.

<sup>682</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, ed. and intro. by Robert Hampson (London: Penguin Books, 1995), 16-20.

## **Summary: Youth in an Old World**

This section juxtaposed two fictional versions of postwar youth – Vian's *L'Ecume des jours* (1947) and MacInnes's *Absolute Beginners* (1959). The two novels share many preoccupations and concerns: a sense that youth is a process of formation and one which has its own distinct culture; the exploration of new technologies, opportunities and habits; the reflection of the impact of American culture (especially jazz) on postwar Britain and France as alternative to national cultures; and the sense of youth's fragility, which the young characters share, a sense that it is over almost as soon as it has begun.

British and French perceptions of postwar youth share two main culturally pessimistic narratives.

The first of these narratives concerns anxiety for youth as a national asset, and reflects the projected collective hopes of the elder generation in the formulation *they are us*, inspiring speculations about their political and economic participation. As every generation carries the high expectations of their elders, these tense anticipations were hardly without precedent; yet, because postwar youth enjoyed a more liberal upbringing and were less influenced by their elders, this anxiety for youth – ultimately an anxiety for national continuity – was unprecedented in scale. In France, this projection relied on a strong self-consciousness of belatedness, apparent in the representation of France as a beleaguered country that needed to restore itself to former strength (as Monnet put it, 'modernisation or decadence'). Paradoxically, this relied on a leap into the future to find the 'pre-war rhythm'. Great expectations of postwar youths led to some consternation about signs that they were not as promising after all, being instead disoriented and criminal, 'abstentionist' and consumerist. This might explain attempts by Perruchot and Giroud to try to balance their overviews by reiterating their confidence in young people, a confidence based on the relative conservatism and goodwill of youth. Morin, however, wrote in no uncertain terms of the juvenilised mass culture as one of 'bread and circuses', hopelessly obsessed with youth, beauty and love.

In Britain, the state openly sought to recruit youths as a national resource, acknowledging the need for their tempering and development through the

military (National Service), education (the Crowther and Robbins committees) and professional training (Newsom). Lady Albemarle's emollient views contrasted with an otherwise hostile public opinion of young people. Youths were seen as doubly corrupt: not just menacingly delinquent, as the newspapers suggested, but worse, delinquent in relative affluence – that is, ungrateful and refusing to contribute. This was also true of their general conservatism, and their narrow political involvement (in the CND) reflected more a disdain for conventional politics. It seems that for most of the 1950s, young people could do no right, hemmed in as they were by the hopes and pessimism of their elders: they disappointed the false hope for a 'new classlessness' and were seen as largely culpable for the transformation of traditional English life.

A second major pessimistic narrative casts youth as the face of an alien and unpromising modernity, tying the image of youth to images of the new postwar age – this time, *they are not us*. This narrative encompasses two interrelated elements constructing youths as a menacing unknown: the generation gap distancing youth from their elders; and the Americanisation of youth as reflecting that of wider popular culture. The widening generation gap darkened perceptions of postwar youths: they were shaped independently of mainstream adult culture, and were largely inscrutable and misunderstood on both sides of the Channel, designated as desperate or delinquent, and distanced further by their vilification. The seeming impenetrability of youth culture is readily apparent in Vian's and MacInnes's novels: both stress the sheltered, largely self-referential, strictly young cultural space that excludes adults and sustains its own language, customs and a fresh approach to the world. MacInnes's frustration is with certain positions associated with the older generation and its resistance to changes in the hierarchies of class, race and age. Vian has no such direct target, but simply expresses frustration at the ephemeral nature of youth, which inevitably yields to the adult imperatives of work and seriousness.

Interestingly, both novels stray from the current youth parlance and fresh outlooks and employ Decadent gestures that betray their consciousness of belatedness; in an old world, the fictional young characters are simultaneously precocious and wizened. *Absolute Beginners* opens with the narrator's lament over fallen 'teenagers nowadays' and their cultural consumption, highlighting not simply the urge to distinguish age groups in very precise terms, but also a sense



of accelerated time. A similar awareness pervades *L'Ecume des jours*, whose Decadent streak encompasses the menacing quality of passing time together with sustenance by artifice and its undoing by nature – an extension of the trope of aging as degeneration. In real life, too, French and British youth were wise beyond their years and not necessarily optimistic: Giroud and Perruchot noted this impression in their surveys, as did the Albemarle Report, which considered youth experience with all its challenges and complexities. On both sides of the generation gap, pessimistic attitudes were apparent.

The issue of 'Americanisation' and its modernised, consumerist character inspired excitement at the foreign mixed with trepidation in both Britain and France: traditionalists viewed it as cultural imperialism, whereas to many young observers it presented an alternative and thus the opportunity of cultural liberation. The young protagonists of both Vian and MacInnes are fascinated with American jazz culture, which they exoticise and fetishise, appreciating the room it makes for youth culture. If youth cultures had already been regarded as problematic for being delinquent and politically abstentionist, the consumerist link to American culture also figured them as destructive of national cultures – partly, as MacInnes's narrator/protagonist noted, because American influence was overbearing. The understanding of youths in both Britain and France primarily in economic terms, through 'participation' (earning and spending) or through being 'teenage consumers', did little to improve their image. If anything, this reductive, quantifying basis offered little room for showing improvement: working and earning more would have provoked envy and contempt, and spending more would have justified young people's consumerist image.

The link between youths and 'Americanisation' was also problematic for highlighting already existent social and political problems. In Britain, not only did American influence 'corrupt' youths, but it aggravated the 'racial problem' through young people's complex adoption of (displaced, sanitised) black American popular culture. Even to once hopeful observers like Booker, the British 'vitality fantasy' of youth was illuminated by extra-British elements. In France, as Césaire claimed, imperialism and American-style modernisation were two faces of the same destructive capitalism: this was a sensitive bundle of anxieties about displacement (mobility, local and professional identity) and about difference (colonial domination, national identity) that inspired, as seen in

previous chapters, much pessimism. It is relevant to the image of youth because, as Barthes understood and Vian demonstrated, fetishised consumerist plenty, cleanliness and effortlessness informed Morin's 'juvenilised' culture, animated by American tropes. The new face of mass culture was the dark face of youth.

While the narrative of youth as national asset was familiar (if not usually so tensely expectant), the narrative of youth as agent of an alien modernity was largely unprecedented, and reflected uncertainties and insecurities in the face of the sweeping social and economic changes of postwar reconstruction. This discourse embodied various values: to view youth as threatening existing ways of life was a conservative outlook, which tapped into class- and nation-related identity anxieties; the trope of belatedness highlights a certain inferiority complex of older generations in old, tired countries (although admittedly this was more prevalent in France); finally, the trope of 'bread and circuses' used with regard to youth implied that while their morals might have been lax, they still enjoyed greater wellbeing and opportunities – the stakes were higher after the war, and so were anxieties about them.

The concerns informing cultural pessimism about youth in a modernising age link back to themes discussed earlier in this thesis. These include fears for the continuity of social structure, evident in the 'transnational classlessness' myth of youth; fears for national continuity in light of youth's Americanisation and break with traditions; fears for 'high' culture itself in the face of a 'juvenilised' popular culture democratised by affluence and consumerism; fears for the redefinition (and thus the transformation) of collective identity by decolonisation and an Americanised inward colonisation; and fears for the redemptive roles of technology and modernisation in general, considering that the ambivalent social import of the latter enabled greater affluence and reconstruction but also entailed consumerism and cultural shallowness, presented certain social strata with new opportunities but also eroded traditional order and identities.

The issue of youth, more than social structure and national identity, was one in which the French and British experiences were similar. This was because the European youth phenomenon as a whole was largely unprecedented: an emergent intermediary group between children and adults had a clear economic presence but no fixed social status and every intention to distinguish themselves

from previous generations.<sup>683</sup> Yet some divergences between British and French experiences must still be acknowledged here. Americanisation was more noticeable in France, as American culture was more distant from French culture than from British culture (although, as chapter 1 shows, the British-American familiarity bred its own contempts). Decolonisation, for reasons already discussed, was from the outset more sensitive and more painful in France, and this informed the vigour with which France's cultural 'inward colonisation' was carried out. The relative prominence of (mainly commercial) British youth culture within British popular culture preceded its French parallel, influencing it in mainstream, depoliticised, Americanised directions. However, it was in Britain that young people caused the gravest outbursts of youth violence, significantly not against authority but against other marginalised groups, be they other young people (Ted, Mod and Rocker beach fights) or immigrants (the 1958 riots). In the face of this fresh-faced phenomenon, the sense of belatedness seemed stronger in France, related as it was to the sense that wartime occupation and collaboration burdened the postwar period and needed to be left behind; in Britain, where no such overhaul seemed necessary, the sense of belatedness was less prominent and was tied up with the erosion of old class hierarchies by affluence.

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<sup>683</sup> Judt, 347.

## **Conclusion: Postwar Cultural Pessimism and Its Relevance**

The present thesis has its origins in an earlier project which explored the meanings of Western identity in contemporary Western European cultures. Two dominant impressions emerged from that project: first, that the term ‘the West’ is very imprecisely defined and thus can be used extremely flexibly; and secondly, that as soon as a notion of the West emerged (as early as the partition of the Roman Empire by Diocletian) it was seen as declining. A wide range of historical and cultural commentators from Gibbon to Schopenhauer to Spengler to Adorno to, more recently, Kermode, Brantlinger, Whissen and Buckley, have made the concept of decline central to their discussions of the West and Western identities. Discussions of decline take many forms – with politics, philosophy, morality or even the environment as their focus. I became particularly interested in this ‘declinism’ that focused on culture and which Bennett has usefully dubbed ‘cultural pessimism’.

The test of any theory lies in its ability to account for particular instances. The present thesis left aside the general notion of ‘the West’ to explore and compare two specific Western European countries – Britain and France – at a specific juncture in history – the era following the end of the Second World War, roughly 1944 to 1964. The decision to study France and Britain together and the decision to study them during the postwar period are mutually supportive, and the merit of cultural pessimism is in providing the context for such an undertaking. By juxtaposing and comparing two national cultures, I was able to gain perspective on many issues that, from the inside, have been interpreted as particular to one or other nation’s history. But if comparison sometimes reveals Britain and France to be more similar than is generally realised, it also highlights the distinctions between national responses to similar problems and challenges. From the perspective of cultural pessimism, affinities between the two national cultures were greatest during the period of transition when both experienced an international decline that forced them to redefine their collective identities. Other

nations and other periods might be the subject of future studies along these lines, but this period seemed to me a particularly rich source of affinities (and relative differences) between the two national cultures. The postwar period is a particularly fertile ground for *comparative* studies of cultural pessimism, as attempted here.

In three themed sections, I juxtaposed and compared the French and British interventions in three major areas: social status, national identity and youth culture. In each one I explored a broad range of material before focusing on key representative texts. Some common tendencies emerge from this juxtaposition and comparison. The first section revealed a strong sense of marginality and entrapment in an obsolete social order that was seen to have outlived itself after 1945: this was aggravated by new and demystifying outlooks on everyday life, and found its outlet in intellectual as well as popular pessimism regarding the prospects of socioeconomic transformation and mobility. The second section presented the growing sense that traditional national culture was under threat and required a deliberate effort for its conservation as 'heritage'. This challenge was further complicated by what might be called a semiotic crisis, seeing the representation of the past, the present, and the link between them, as encumbered by the postwar realities of the age of atom and catastrophe. The third section shows that despite the different terms used, the effects of British affluence and French *rattrapage* and consumerism on youth (and on popular culture) were generally similar. The third section develops some ideas discussed earlier, linking pessimism over social change with anxieties for the prospective transformation brought about by the rise of youth culture, and linking a fear for the continuity of national culture with the widening Americanisation of youth culture and of popular culture in general. While the first two sections focus on pessimistic sentiments directed at the past and the changing present, the third section shows, through the treatment of the youth phenomenon, the projection of pessimistic attitudes into the future.

This study relies on the assumption that all cultures are infinitely divergent, and that, while their differences can be assumed, a case needs to be made for their comparison. The structure of this thesis reflects this by presenting in each section British and French contexts in juxtaposition, letting their particularities show and then introducing a comparative element in the section

summaries. Noting cultural differences as well as commonalities enabled me to avoid over-simplification. Several salient differences were introduced in the introduction and referred to in subsequent sections: the greater initial resonance of Americanisation and decolonisation in France, and the greater resistance to them; the slower pace of economic and industrial modernisation in Britain; greater direct cultural interventionism in France, certainly under de Gaulle; and the stronger tendency in Britain to depoliticise dissent and displace it into class concerns or isolated issues (like nuclear disarmament). Concerning cultural pessimism, national divergences became clear: a more disturbing pessimism regarding the nation and national culture was experienced in France and was strongly rooted in the need to break with its wartime shame; disillusionment with affluence, especially when it informed the vilification of youths, seemed more prominent in the British public discourse; and finally, the 'two cultures' debate, together with the CND initiative, reflects a greater and more public ambivalence toward technological progress and modernisation in Britain than in France.

The value of any study of cultural pessimism is in offering a consistent interpretation – a narrative – of narratives of decline. The narrative suggested in this thesis has several aims: to interpret certain representative works of the postwar period as manifestations of cultural pessimism (a literary element); to contextualise these works in their wider socio-cultural settings (a historical element); and to discuss these works and contexts in light of the conceptual 'toolkit' of cultural pessimism assembled from the history, terms, tropes and relevance of cultural pessimism in the introduction (a theoretical element). It goes without saying that each of these elements could be opened up and developed further.<sup>684</sup> Other narratives of cultural pessimism could be identified, and the corpus of tropes of cultural pessimism could be expanded: I have not, for example, developed the figure of Faust, also noted by Spengler, nor that of Prometheus.

The chosen approach enabled me to do several things. First, I was able to read important but very different French and British literary works not only in the context of the period in which they were written and first read, but also in the context of what was going on across the Channel. To compare Sillitoe's view of

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<sup>684</sup> In this respect, too, I follow Bennett's lead. Bennett, *Cultural Pessimism*, 17, 179.

class and power with Genet's, to examine what Englishness meant to Wilson alongside Duras's view of Frenchness and to see postwar youth through the eyes of both MacInnes and Vian, provides fresh perspectives on familiar works and foregrounds the cultural pessimism that binds them together. Discussions of Genet, Duras and Vian usually focus on their particularly French experimental nature. Sillitoe, Wilson and MacInnes, meanwhile, are situated in the context of a distinctive British realism. By looking at these works together through the lens of cultural pessimism, their unrecognised similarities emerge. The works I consider partake in the discourse of cultural pessimism; and, in turn, provide insight into its workings as a narrative system. Other works are mentioned throughout this thesis as exemplifying postwar British and French literature: Rochefort's *Les Petits Enfants du siècle*, Dunn's *Up the Junction*, Sagan's *Bonjour tristesse* and Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*, for example. The choices which I eventually made were motivated by the thematic richness of the works themselves and the opportunity they provided for a discussion of the widest possible range of tropes of cultural pessimism.

Secondly, by looking at French and British culture more broadly through a comparative lens, I was able to highlight both the differences (for example, in attitudes to the loss of empire) and the similarities (for example, in response to encroaching Americanisation) between the two countries. As Stefan Collini has recently observed, in both France and Britain "the writing of what was once confidently called 'the national story' has been affected by similar factors," and "both now stand as awkward members of a larger Europe... without a distinctive world-historical mission."<sup>685</sup> The social and cultural histories I offer here shed some light on how this came about and offer a starting point for further research into the historical development of contemporary Europe.

Finally, this historically-based study allowed me to test the value of the concept of cultural pessimism as a tool for analysis, which I found rich and rewarding. Whether or not Britain and France declined in fact, many of their citizens undoubtedly believed that theirs was an age in which the best was over and the worst was to come. In this historical context, I unpacked European cultural pessimism into some of its constituent tropes but, as noted above, more

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<sup>685</sup> Collini, "French Contrasts," 54.

work is required here. A full compendium of the tropes and imagery of cultural pessimism would be a useful tool for future research into the history of decline and indeed 'the West'.<sup>686</sup> This thesis demonstrates how cultural pessimism can also contribute to relevant literary discussions, despite not being a strictly literary concept. Indeed, I would argue that a consideration of the discourse of cultural pessimism enriches many different disciplines.

This thesis illustrates on a small scale the centrality of perceptions of decline to French and British cultural identities: they share a precarious, endangered existence that in itself helps define them against the erosion of their traditional or historical foundations. This claim stands independently of Collini's suggestion that *declinism* corresponds or reacts to actual *decline*: the truth of narratives of cultural decline may be contested, but their existence and validity as expressions of personal outlook or mentality are not debatable. It is not, for example, the actual precedence of Roman decline which is important to cultural pessimism, but the *image* of declining Rome as a moral, an object lesson. Pessimism is an attitude to the world, not a description of it: because of its *a priori* assumptions the image it presents is not a depiction of the social state of affairs but a *projection*.<sup>687</sup> As such (recall Genet's 'image and reflection' in *Comment jouer Le Balcon*), the pessimistic outlook is essentially self-referential and resistant to disproof, but these qualities also help preserve its intriguing rhetorical potency.<sup>688</sup>

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<sup>686</sup> Montandon's collection shows the variety and detail such a compendium can have, but it lacks a systematic synthesis, being a conference proceedings volume. *Mythes de la Décadence*, dir. by Alain Montandon (Clermont-Ferrand: Presses Universitaires Blaise Pascal Maison de la Recherche, 2001).

<sup>687</sup> Bailey notes the detrimental legacy of philosophy on the understanding of pessimism in its refusal of the affective side of pessimistic views: they are either wholly rational or wholly unreasonable. Joe Bailey, *Pessimism* (London: Routledge, 1988), 6, 19, 27. Maasen and Weingart suggest at least three theoretical directions for reasoning the 'unreasonable' tendency of pessimism, through a sociology of knowledge that would examine the suggestive function of imagery and metaphor. Sabine Maasen and Peter Weingart, *Metaphors and the Dynamics of Knowledge* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 34-37.

<sup>688</sup> A small contemporary example is the celebrity of Jade Goody which, once established as negative, is seen to contribute to the corruption of moral/cultural standards. The pessimistic gaze constructs Jade Goody as both the product and the cause of the decline of British culture.



One of my motivations in approaching this project, and one which animated many occasional conversations about it, was that the immediate postwar period set the stage for much of the current western European order. Studies of the postwar period play a crucial role in explaining and accounting for what followed: not just war's aftermath, but its legacy and the legacy of postwar reconstruction have had long-lasting effects on Europe. More particularly, an examination of postwar cultural pessimism helps understand more recent variants of cultural pessimism, which, in recent years, have multiplied.<sup>689</sup> This suggests another trajectory for prospective research, proceeding from the hypothesis that the latter half of the twentieth century shows the influence of earlier postwar varieties of cultural pessimism.

European manifestations of cultural pessimism also continue to inform understandings of European identities. This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Rome and, while European integration has progressed much since 1957, pessimistic narratives continue to plague it. Such narratives point out the detached nature of supranational regional politics, and to the way the latter reputedly comes at the expense of national particularities and local identities, particularly the smaller ones in the union. The problem of the Roman barbarians has found a new form in today's 'Eastern problems': the problem of incorporating Russia, which alone can dwarf all other union members put together and eclipse the European character of the union with its predominantly Asian populations; and the problem of integrating Turkey, the first officially non-Christian state to be considered for accession, thus challenging the supposedly non-religious definitions of European identity relying instead on shared traditions and heritage.<sup>690</sup> The European discourse on the

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<sup>689</sup> Cf. Raymond Tallis, *Enemies of Hope: A Critique of Contemporary Pessimism: Irrationalism, Anti-Humanism and Counter-Enlightenment* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1997); Nicolas Baverez, *La France qui tombe* (Paris: Perrin, 2003). For comments on the 'franco-pessimism' trend and some British comparisons, see: Perry Anderson, "Dégringolade," *LRB* 26, 17 (2 September 2004); and Perry Anderson, "Union Sucrée," *LRB* 26, 18 (23 September 2004).

<sup>690</sup> The Romans and barbarians presently absent from Europe moved across the water to the United States, where they feature prominently in discussions of America-as-Empire. Cf. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press,

Russian and Turkish cases is a prime candidate for discourse analysis with regard to cultural pessimistic tropes. Such an analysis might offer insights into the discourse of EU expansionism and integration beyond acknowledged political and ideological stances.

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2000); and most recently: Cullen Murphy, *Are We Rome? The Fall of an Empire and the Fate of America* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2007). An interesting historical perspective on the influence of the Turkish threat on the formation of secular European identity was offered recently in: Nancy Bisaha, *Creating East and West: Renaissance Humanists and the Ottoman Turks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

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